

## Diaspora at War

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# Diaspora at War

The Chinese of Singapore between Empire and  
Nation, 1937–1945

*by*

Ernest Koh



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*Cover illustration:* Ho Weng Toh in front of the squadron emblem of the 1st Bombardment Squadron, Chinese American Composite Wing. Image courtesy of Ho Weng Toh, reproduced with permission.

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## NOTES ON ROMANISATION AND TRANSLATION

There are two common ways to Romanise Chinese names and words into English. These are the older Wade-Giles system used on Taiwan and the newer pinyin system that is employed on the mainland. I have been recommended by readers and editors to use pinyin, as publishers are increasingly adopting it internationally. There are some important exceptions. The names of political figures that have become familiar in Wade-Giles such as Chiang Kai Shek, Sun Yat Sen, the Soong family sisters, as well as idiosyncratic personal names such as H.H. Kung all appear in the older Romanisation format. Names of Malayan Chinese such as Tan Kah Kee, the merchant tycoon, and Lee Kim Hock, one of my interviewees, appear in their dialect form as is the norm in the region.

The interviews cited within were mostly translated from Mandarin by the author. The ones that do not indicate a specific language were conducted in English. The quotes reproduced within this text are verbatim transcriptions of the interview. Hence, those contain a number of linguistic errors and idiosyncrasies.



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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

On 25 June 2011, a group of seventy Malaysian and Singaporean Chinese set off from the Ee Hoe Hean Club in Singapore in a convoy of twenty-one private cars, bound for Kunming, China. The motorcade would take the same route as groups of overseas Chinese volunteers from Malaya had travelled along in the late 1930s, when they responded to a call by the Chinese government of the day to serve as drivers, mechanics, labourers, and nurses on the last land link between China and supplies from the outside world, the Burma Road.

The choice of Singapore as the starting point for this commemorative journey is understandable, and in fact rather obvious once one comes to know something about Nanyang Chinese nationalism during China's war against Japan. Between 1937, when the Sino-Japanese War began, and 1942, when Singapore fell to invading Japanese armies, the British colony was the epicentre of China's overseas war relief movement. The Federation of China Relief Fund of the South Seas, which was the largest overseas Chinese relief fund organisation in the world, was headquartered on the island. It raised nearly C\$200 million for the war effort, and was responsible for sending volunteer labour and troops to China and the Burma Road. From across Southeast Asia, thousands of Chinese converged on Singapore, where they were marshalled by the Federation before being sent north by train or ship. Yet for seventy years, there was little public acknowledgment of their wartime experiences. Nor have they ever been a part of the nation's strictly managed war narrative, which has focused exclusively on the Japanese occupation of the island.

China nationalism was not the only wartime political movement among the Chinese population. From the moment Britain declared war on Germany, the Anglophone population, too, mobilised for hostilities. This rallying occurred despite the fact that there was no imminent threat from Nazi Germany to Singapore, or to any of the Empire's Far Eastern possessions for that matter. Still, there was a vested interest in a British victory. Many donated cash for the war effort, volunteered for armed service, and some found themselves in distant theatres of conflict. Once again, in the country's war histories, we see little mention of this.

This book traces the war memories and experiences of Singapore's Chinese. It tells stories of the conflict that most would not expect to read or hear about. In these stories, the Chinese are not civilians living under Japanese occupation, as they are normally portrayed. They are pilots and mariners, soldiers and drivers. They are at war, but they fight not to defend 'their home'. Instead, they go to war for their ideologies—for China, or for Empire.

Why is there a need for a book like this? Writers working on Singapore's history have produced a great deal of literature on Singapore's wartime past, although the popularity of the subject is a relatively new development. It is, in part at least, a product of the Singapore state's incorporation of the Japanese occupation experience into the nation's creation myth, as will be explicated later. But since the 50th anniversary of the fall of Singapore, and emerging out of much international fanfare about half-centenaries of the Second World War, researchers and popular authors alike have become inspired to revisit the role of the conflict in shaping the former British colony into a nation-state. In these studies, there is an inevitable focus on how ordinary residents of Singapore made sense of the occupation, since that is the most abundant quarry to mine for the origins of post-colonial nationalism. At the same time more sophisticated works on commemoration and the deliberate forgetting of the uneven, racialised occupation experience have provided a crucial dimension to understanding the nature of Singapore's war remembrance. But there is a curious assumption in this body of writing that has remained unproblematised. Studies of the war have concerned themselves with events and experiences that occurred within a defined time period and geography. War came to Malaya in December 1941, heralded by the landings at Kota Bharu and southern Thailand, and ended in August 1945 with the Japanese surrender. Where the experiences of the colonial citizenry are concerned, scholars have marked this temporal span as when the Second World War took place. Before that, Malaya was not at war. There is a functional logic to this approach. War began when bombs were dropped and shells were fired in anger. There was none of this in Malaya until December 1941.

What limitations are there to such a literal framework? Perhaps a better way to consider the historiographical boundaries imposed by this periodisation and delineation is to ponder what has been omitted in Singapore's war history. It may surprise some historians to learn that volunteers from the colony served in the Chinese army on the Burma Road. These were actions that were set against the Sino-Japanese War that began in 1937. Yet other historians may find it unexpected that there were also volunteers in

Europe and the Atlantic fighting in a very different conflict against German and Italian forces. They were caught up in a war fought by Britain against its European enemies that began in 1939.

Overseas Chinese involvement, and their absence from histories of the wider Second World War outside of the traditional bracketing of the conflict, compels a historical question. Just how did they frame their experiences of the war? What were their points of reference? Have the emphases on space and post-colonial nationhood led to a distortion of historians' understanding of Singapore's war history, where its ultimate end has been traditionally painted as being post-colonial state sovereignty? By drawing on the experiences of the Chinese community, I want to use this monograph to challenge two fundamental ideas that underpin the writing of Singapore's Second World War—the periodisation of the war, and the geographical anchoring of the conflict. I want to do this by foregrounding people's ideologies at the time, and pushing ahistorical national narratives and spaces into the background. In doing so, I look to pluralise the conflict and introduce the notion that there were multiple frames—more than one 'Second World War'—through which the colonial citizenry understood and created meanings out of the war. This ideological heterogeneity meant that different constituencies within the Chinese community were living and experiencing different sets of conflicts asynchronously. Many of these wars did not resemble the one presented in the national narrative of the past, what I call Singapore's national Second World War. Loyalties to political centres of the day, principally the British Empire or Nationalist China, shaped alternative war experiences.

Since it was first put forward in 1961 in *The Origins of the Second World War*, English historian A.J.P. Taylor's idea of 'the long Second World War' has provided scholars with a way of thinking about the disparate nature of the conflicts between nation-states that have come to be collectively termed as the Second World War.<sup>1</sup> The war in which China and Japan found themselves set against each other was distinct in theme and shape from the ones that saw fighting occur between Japan and Britain, Germany and France, the Soviet Union and Germany, and the United States and Japan. Historians have brought these wars under an umbrella term, a world war, because fighting took place on battlefields worldwide, but in reality they often had little to do with on another beyond having common

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<sup>1</sup> See A.J.P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (Hamilton and Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1961).

belligerents. To demonstrate his line of reasoning, Taylor pointed to the vagueries of the Second World War's opening. The answer to the simple question of when the conflict began depends on which war one was referring to. "Russians date it from 22 June 1941, the Chinese from November 1937, the Abyssinians . . . from October 1935, and the Americans from 7 December 1941."<sup>2</sup> The idea of plural Second World Wars, therefore, has a longer history in the study of the conflict.

In this book, we will see how a constituency of Chinese in Malaya, the ones who looked to China as their political centre, lived in a state of war following the Marco Polo Bridge Incident. After the Anglo-French declaration of war against Germany, an Anglophone faction that identified with the British Empire followed suit. Another group experienced a different kind of war after the Japanese systematically began their assault on Western interests in the Pacific. What this book calls 'other Second World Wars' therefore refers to distinct conflicts that drew factions of Malayan Chinese to war at different times and different places. I retain the term 'Second World War' in naming the conflicts to communicate the idea that they take place against the wider global backdrop of war, and that these plural conflicts have, over time, been selectively amalgamated into a single war narrative that has been refashioned into something quite different in character to suit the purposes of nation-building.

This book has two aims, the first is historical and the second methodological. The historical aim is to recover the voices and experiences of very different Second World Wars in Singapore history. Going beyond the national war narrative, this study uses three sets of experiences to consider absent frames of remembering the conflict among the Singapore Chinese community—what it labels as the Sino-Japanese, Imperial, and Pacific Second World Wars. By mapping the experiences of individuals within each of these frames, it will demonstrate how the unique themes of regional and global connections and the nature of diasporic identity that characterised and shaped these conflicts, provides us with new levels of richness to Singapore's war history which serve to expand the conflict from a national experience into a trans-national one. It reveals how the Chinese residing in Malaya had access to multiple affiliations and networks that they consciously prioritised, discarded, or made sacrifices for.

As a history of the Second World War, this book also seeks to peel back the simplistic, deeply nationalistic narratives about the war in their

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<sup>2</sup> Taylor, *Origins of the Second World War*, 1.



concern about staffing, fighting, and organisation in the conflict's various theatres. Considering the experiences of the overseas Chinese provides historians with an opportunity to witness not merely the Malayan Chinese but also different factions working, fighting, and flying in groups of multi-national composition. This complexity in populating various fighting and labour units is an obvious but often ignored character of the Second World War: to call it a truly global conflict is something of a tired cliché, since that phrase is often used to express how the war was fought in all parts of the globe. But more than just battlefields, it was a global conflict because of staffing and organisation: it sat atop of, and hence drew from, existing associations forged out of empire and migration.

The methodological aim of this book concerns the usefulness of alternative Second World War frames as a means of studying the history of the conflict. This book offers an example of how Singapore's national war narrative can be unwedded from the past. Taken together, the three frames of the Second World War presented in this book allow us to consider the global historical reality of Singapore's war, and to challenge its current geographical limitations. As part of its wider contribution to historiography, this book mounts an argument for the dehistoricising of the nation-state as a container for the study of Singapore's past, and the dismantling of the political structures that have girded the study of the island's history. In this respect it adds to the growing body of scholarship that connect Singapore to wider regional or global histories by authors such as Derek Heng, Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, Sunil Amrith, Karl Hack and Jean-Louis Margolin.<sup>3</sup> The non-national framing of the subject also gives us a point of reference to begin to understand the power of memory politics in the postwar era, where the trans-national nature of the Chinese community's history is submerged by the needs of the post-colonial state, and offer further possibilities for other frames of post-colonial war history to be explored.

Amid the vast historiography that has emerged on Singapore's war history, one expects to already find histories of alternative war experiences, perhaps along the lines of the kind of 'histories from the margins' that scholars such as James Warren, Lai Ah Eng, Stephen Dobbs, and Loh Kah

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<sup>3</sup> See D. Heng and S. Khairudin (eds), *Singapore in Global History* (Amsterdam University Press: Amsterdam, 2011); S. Amrith, "Indians Overseas? Governing Tamil Migration to Malaya, 1870–1941", *Past and Present*, No. 208 (August 2010), 231–61; and K. Hack and J.-L. Margolin (eds), *Singapore from Temasek to the 21st Century: Reinventing the Global City* (NUS Press: Singapore, 2010).

Seng have written, and which seem to have taken hold of other ideas like gender and development in more recent times in the writing of Singapore history.<sup>4</sup> For this kind of study, one would think that the Second World War would be a marvellous candidate given how diverse the population was at the time of the conflict. Yet authors have traditionally appeared to look past the possibility of constructing alternate frames of Singapore's wartime past, particularly in the English language literature. Stephen Leong's work in the late 1970s on the Malayan Chinese and the Sino-Japanese War is one of only a few such published studies that explicitly connects the experience of Singapore Chinese to the conflict in China. For a long time, it cut a lonely account in the historiography. However, there have been some indications that this is changing. Anthropologist Chan Chow Wah's *Light on the Lotus Hill*, a popular history documenting the significance of Singapore's Shuanglin Monastery as a training centre for drivers bound for south-western China during the Sino-Japanese War, generated much interest when it was published in 2009. That year, Chan's work helped inspire an exhibition mounted jointly by the National Archives of Singapore and the Yunnan Provincial Archives on the *Nanyang ji gong* (the Chinese term given to the volunteers from Southeast Asia). The exhibition in turn played a key role in generating the enthusiasm for the staging of the Burma Road commemorative journey in 2011, mentioned earlier. Heritage newsletters and broadsheets have also begun to cover stories of Malayan pilots who fought in China. There is clearly a growing interest in Singapore's other wars. And there are, I think, two reasons for this development.

The first has to do with the rise in public interest in the past, a trend that is not unique to Singapore. Writing in the early 1990s, the influential social historian Raphael Samuel noted that history had irrevocably transformed into a mass activity, something akin to a pastime witnessing a steady proliferation of followers. The past was now a spectacle, he wrote, and not just something that was studied in school textbooks or debated over exclusively by the intelligentsia.<sup>5</sup> In more current times, the mass

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<sup>4</sup> See J.F. Warren, *Ah Ku and Karayuki-san: Prostitution in Singapore 1870–1940* (Singapore University Press: Singapore, 2003); A.H. Lai, *Peasants, Proletarians and Prostitutes: A Preliminary Investigation into the Work of Chinese Women in Colonial Malaya* (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies: Singapore, 1986); S. Dobbs, *The Singapore River: A Social History 1819–2002* (Singapore University Press: Singapore, 2003); Loh, K.S., "Records and Voices of Social History: The Case of the Great Depression in Singapore", *Tonan Ajia Kenkyu*, Vol. 44 (1), 2006, 31–54.

<sup>5</sup> R. Samuel, "The Return of History", *London Review of Books*, 14 June 1990, 12.

media, through the medium of television, newspapers, and the Internet, has become a focal point for the coverage of newsworthy historical subjects. Archives, heritage centres, and museums have staged exhibitions aimed at drawing the general public through their doors. History books written for the layperson have become increasingly common. Biographies of national heroes as well as works of historical fiction fill the shelves of popular bookstores.<sup>6</sup> All of these developments have been global in nature, and in Singapore they have had significant local implications. Not least, they shape scholarship by providing an impetus for historians to conduct research that is of interest to a broader public, and not just to academe. In this regard, alternative experiences that surprise or challenge existing ideas often capture the imagination more powerfully compared to revisiting a familiar narrative.

The present significance of the past to groups outside the discipline has been the subject of much speculation. As the Australian intellectual historian Bain Attwood has written, some commentators consider the rise in history's importance to the general public as being the outcome of a crisis that has been shaped by a rapid transformation in information technology, communication, and patterns of work and consumption. Such changes have left many in awe, but also deeply anxious. He suggests that there is a desire for an anchor in a world that is constantly in flux. Others have observed that history has become integral to the strength of debates about the nation and national identity. Having a say in what is recorded about the past and the kind of histories that ought to be written is seen as a way of securing the future, and so revisions that contest how the past is represented have become more fashionable.<sup>7</sup> This is particularly true in Singapore. With the dilution of the state's ability to persuade its population that its version of the past is the authoritative one, there has been an increase in demand for counter-histories that reveal 'the truth' behind historical events.<sup>8</sup> The popularisation of history has also increased its salience in the minds of individuals. Crucially, this has had the effect of compelling individuals who have withheld their experiences to recognise their cultural value and worth as an account for posterity, or for those who

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<sup>6</sup> B. Attwood, *Telling the truth about Aboriginal History* (Allen & Unwin: Sydney, 2005), 11–12.

<sup>7</sup> Attwood, *Aboriginal History*, 12.

<sup>8</sup> See for example M. Barr and C. Trocki (eds.), *Paths Not Taken: Political Pluralism in Post-War Singapore* (NUS Press: Singapore, 2008), as well as the controversy caused by S. Yap, R. Lim and W.K. Leong's popular history *Men in White: The Untold Story of Singapore's Ruling Political Party* (Singapore Press Holdings: Singapore, 2009).

know of stories outside of the mainstream to appreciate their significance and push for their public validation. Both were applicable in my hunt for veterans of Singapore's other wars as I conducted research for this book.

The second, more critical reason relates to primary sources. Much of the archival evidence, such as service records, logbooks, letters, newspaper reports, and clan association records, is scattered across the world in various archives and personal collections from England to Taiwan, from the United States to Singapore. Where they are held in institutional repositories, they are usually not indexed in a way that would make discovery for a study like this easy, or even feasible. When Malayan Chinese volunteered for service in foreign militaries, they were seldom designated as anything more than 'British national' or 'Chinese national'. Sifting through the mountain of records in British or Chinese armed services, looking for signs of overseas Chinese from Malaya, is an impractical task. Furthermore, when found, the individual pieces of evidence are often fragmented and offer at best clues or a small part of a richer story. In some cases, documents such as newspaper reports are brief and anecdotal. Other archival sources simply no longer exist, having been destroyed by their original owners in the hope of preventing their discovery. Such was the fate of at least some of the enlistment records for the volunteers who travelled to China. The Japanese invasion of Malaya and the punishments meted out to those who were found to have given support to the Chinese government meant many records that implicated individuals were often buried or burned. Yet more documents are stored away in private collections long after the death of veterans, their significance not always appreciated by those who inherit custody of them. But advances in technology have made a project like this, which requires a concerted global search for sources, more viable than in decades prior. The Public Records Office has now begun to digitise the index of many of their holdings. Social networking sites such as Facebook made possible contact with the granddaughter of one of the figures featured in this book, Tan Kay Hai. Living in Seattle, she was also in possession of her grandfather's flying logs.

Where there are gaps in the archival evidence, survivor testimony can be employed to help complete the picture. The emergence of oral history as an acceptable form of primary source has its origins in the 1960s driven by the revolt in the West against the elitism of intellectual historical inquiry. Recovering the voices of the unheard and the marginalised, that of the "poor bloody infantry" of the world, so to speak, was paramount for those

undertaking oral history.<sup>9</sup> How else would the past as lived and witnessed by the majority who often did not leave a written record be illuminated, early oral historians argued. As a historical source, eyewitness testimonies allowed researchers to prospect for data that otherwise was absent from archives. Yet scholars have, rightly, been wary about any over-reliance on oral history. The nature of memory is that it is an imprecise source, one that is shaped by a myriad of external factors such as the passage of time and experiences since the event, or the nature of the relationship between interviewer and interviewee. Regardless, if deployed carefully and corroborated with available archival evidence, oral history offers greater insights for a book like this than if one were to ignore it.

Unsurprisingly, given the span of time between the Second World War and the present day, I came across only a handful of veterans who were alive at the time of this research. The resulting unevenness of oral history sources is obvious with the various interviews that appear later in this book and the different ways they are integrated into this study. In some cases, interviewees saw their stories as insignificant and were hence reluctant to go into too much detail. In contrast, those who were more certain of the historical value of their memories were used to presenting narratives of their past to friends and kin. In such interviews, they were recounting a well-rehearsed tale, and so provided much more vivid and dramatic descriptions. Health or concerns about personal safety were also key to how much information could be gained. One veteran was so unwell with terminal illness that he could only correspond briefly over the telephone. The result was that he only managed to provide slivers of illumination before his death. Another interviewee, who served in a controversial Chinese militia group during the defence of Singapore, asked to have his recordings deleted and most of his story removed from the book because he was concerned he would be regarded as a Communist by the Singapore government. His trepidation was understandable: many of his comrades had been identified as Maoists during the Malayan Emergency and deported to China. Such was the enduring legacy of life among the Chinese of postwar Southeast Asia, where trans-national loyalties often

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<sup>9</sup> N. Tarling, *Historians and Southeast Asian History* (New Zealand Asian Institute: Auckland, 2000), 85.

made particular groups appear insidious and dangerous to public order in the eyes of the state.

Readers accustomed to histories of Chinese overseas communities will find familiar the political and cultural phenomena that occur with transnational dispersion. This book concerns the actions of the Chinese residing in Malaya at the time of the Second World War. For the purposes of discussion, it divides them into two categories to rationalise their motivations during the conflict—an imperial diaspora centred on the English Crown, and a China diaspora centred on China. In recent decades, much has been written on the concept of diaspora, and on what it has been used to describe. This is a book that is less about the migratory processes that brought the Chinese to Malaya, and more about mapping war experiences. Regardless, it is necessary for this book to render a qualification on how the word is employed.

As scholars such as Stephane Dufoix, Ien Ang, and Wang Gungwu have written, diaspora carries with it a great amount of political baggage following the era of decolonisation in Southeast Asia, corresponding also with the rise of Maoist China and Cold War politics. Its usefulness has also been disputed because of the inherent lack of conceptual cohesion in describing the characteristics among the communities—Jewish, Chinese, African, and others—that often receive the label as migrant groups. For Dufoix, diaspora often fails to work as a concept simply because it is utilised to capture, poorly, what he feels are importantly distinctive “ways of constructing, managing, and imagining the relationships between homelands and dispersed peoples.”<sup>10</sup> Indonesianist Ien Ang explains the dangers of misusing the word to create alien ethnic groupings within national communities.<sup>11</sup> Elsewhere, Wang Gungwu has noted the imprecision associated with labelling people of Chinese descent living outside of China, given the need to distinguish between Chinese nationals and ethnic Chinese who have adopted local nationalities.<sup>12</sup>

This monograph sidesteps some of the most critical conceptual issues in a number of ways. Firstly, much of it deals with a historicised period where post-colonial nationalities pose less of a quandary insofar as the use of the word diaspora is concerned. Secondly, in light of concerns over

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<sup>10</sup> S. Dufoix, *Diasporas*, trans. by William Rodarmor (University of California Press: Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 2008), xvi.

<sup>11</sup> I. Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese* (Routledge: London and New York, 2001), 81–82.

<sup>12</sup> G. Wang, *Don't Leave Home: Migration and the Chinese* (Eastern Universities Press: Singapore, 2003), 88.

the outdated scholarly usage of the term Overseas Chinese (which translates to *huaqiao*, or sojourners), this book instead employs the phrasing for convenience, but without the capitalisation in 'overseas' to refer literally to people of ethnic Chinese descent living outside of China. Third, this book does not use diaspora to denote an affiliation that is necessarily only ethnic in nature. Rather, I use the term to describe a kind of ideological relationship that can form between centres and peripheries. I refer to a *China* diaspora (rather than a Chinese diaspora) because of the connection to an *idea* of China that existed around the 1930s that many constituents in this study had, rather than simply to their ethnic Chinese heritage. Their lives and principles revolved around imagined connections to a political system and way of living that they held as ideal. They were all fiercely anti-Communist, for example, and saw in their hopes for post-war China a triumphant and strong liberal democracy under the rule of the Nationalist government. They had very little time for a union with Maoists, and so often came across in interviews as being Nationalists first and Chinese second. That they travelled to serve Kuomintang (KMT) armies instead of Communist ones is easy to overlook. In thinking about plural frames for Second World Wars, one could easily imagine that the same type of ideological connection applied for Chinese overseas who fought for a Communist future in China.

Much like the China diaspora, the notion of an imperial diaspora is based on the understanding that the empire was not just a collection of possessions that were in political orbit around the English Crown. It was also an ideology, a way of life for people who identified with the prestige, power, and modernity that the empire appeared to embody. Up until the 1950s, as an idea, Empire seemed to possess incredible longevity and normalcy to most. Even as imperial systems began to disintegrate, there were those who remained convinced that it would make a comeback, that what we now think of as decolonisation was merely a blip in an imperial story that was to stretch on for centuries more. And so in the 1930s and 1940s, it is perhaps not surprising how even those who lived on its peripheries of Empire were willing to fight to keep it functioning.

On the point of word choice, I will also say something about my use of the term Malayan Chinese in the writing of a Singapore history text. This is a book about absent frames of war experiences among the Chinese community in Singapore today. Before independence in 1965, and hence during the time of the Second World War, there was of course no such state. There was a Chinese population resident on the island, but it was one that was also intrinsically connected to the Chinese living in the rest of the



Straits Settlements and the Federated and Unfederated Malay States. One of the characteristics of everyday life in the Malay States and Singapore was that there was a great deal of movement across the Straits of Johor (as well as among the Malay States). Most of the individuals whose stories appear in subsequent chapters in this book were born in Singapore, but some were born elsewhere, such as the city of Ipoh in the state of Perak, and became Singaporeans after 1965. It would have been disingenuous and ahistorical to refer to them as Singapore Chinese when describing their war experiences. The filter I used to choose which narratives to include in this book was that it did not matter whether an individual was born on the Malay Peninsula or in Singapore. But it was crucial that they needed to end up in Singapore as nationals when the post-colonial state was created, and hence become subordinate to its national war narrative. In short, as is common among historians describing loosely the collection of Malay states and Singapore I use the word Malaya when referring to the region governed, directly and indirectly, as part of the British Empire during colonial era. I employ the term Malayan Chinese to denote people of Chinese descent living in that space at the time, and Singapore Chinese to refer to Malayan Chinese who adopted Singaporean nationality following the creation of the post-colonial state.

Questions of nation, national narratives, national remembrance, and the present are central to this study. Before we can begin to map Singapore's other Second World Wars, we first need to establish the nature of the country's national war, and how it came to be. And so that is where we will begin.



## CHAPTER TWO

### NATION, REMEMBRANCE, AND SINGAPORE'S SECOND WORLD WARS

Narratives, or stories, provide people with a sense of identification and belonging to a political container known as the nation. In his landmark study on the origins of nationalism, Benedict Anderson noted how even the members of the smallest nations will never come to intimately know the vast majority of their compatriots. Yet, in each of their minds lives an imagined association with those that they call their countrymen.<sup>1</sup> The people of a nation come to understand this affiliation through historical stories that are told about it, stories that are defined by linearity, their focus on origins, and their ability to stir emotion. The nation, therefore, represents a particular kind of celebratory and inevitably teleological narrative of social connection, of a group of individuals imagining that they have something powerful and, often, ancient in common.

But nations are not ancient, even those that purport to have a lineage of several thousands of years. They are, in fact, historically novel political inventions—so novel that they have only existed for a relatively brief span of time in human history. And the role of history has been to assist in establishing the logic and legitimacy of the nation. Having a sense of a common past sustains to the affiliation that constitutes national subjects. This is not easily achieved, however, and the success of any national history hinges greatly on the capacity to disregard. The French philosopher Ernest Renan explained as much in his classic essay “What is a Nation?” “Forgetting is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation,” he wrote in 1882.<sup>2</sup> Others have concurred. Eric Hobsbawm argued that narratives of the nation are made up of anachronisms and omissions, while Bain Attwood has pointed out that failures of memory and fabrication are often at the core of the nation’s story.<sup>3</sup> The influential post-colonial theorist

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<sup>1</sup> B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. edn. (Verso: London, 1991), 4.

<sup>2</sup> E. Renan, “What Is a Nation?” in Bhabha, H.K. (ed.), *Nation and Narration* (Routledge: London and New York, 1990), 11.

<sup>3</sup> B. Attwood, *Telling the truth about Aboriginal History* (Allen & Unwin: Sydney, 2005), 13.

Homi Bhabha similarly described how nations “lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind’s eye.”<sup>4</sup>

Across Asia, numerous new nation-states emerged out of old imperial colonies in the aftermath of the Second World War. Following their establishment, these post-colonial nations found it necessary to create historical narratives that provided an explanation for their state’s existence. These national stories were, and continue to be, crucial not only because of the newness of these states but also because of the heterogeneity of their populations, so recent has the idea of the nation-state been to their existence as a political collective. The narratives of post-colonial states serve to construct new loyalties on top of older ones by explaining and reminding communities that their allegiance should be to the nation, and not to their villages, provinces, castes, or religions. National remembrance activities, monuments, and memorials underscore the nation’s story by inventing a fictional continuity between the past (when many of these nation-states did not yet exist) and the present.

In contemporary times, one of the most common subjects of national remembrance in post-colonial Asia is the Second World War. Commemorations of the Second World War in celebration of the decolonised nation follow a common pattern. They involve picking specific war memories of the past, often disingenuously, in order to construct a historical narrative which explain why a particular community was involved in the conflict, and what the outcomes were from this involvement. In post-colonial war remembrance, the need for sovereign nationhood is deeply embedded into the story, and is realised in its final act.

At the same time, the nation’s official war story marginalises memories that sit uncomfortably with ideas of nationhood. Because such aberrant memories contradict and pose powerful challenges to the believability and premise of the nation’s story, post-colonial states have found it necessary to deny them the privilege of the national stage. Such memories do not simply disappear, though they may well appear to. They remain private, told perhaps within the family or among close friends. In short, nationalised narratives of the conflict exist alongside private war memories that are shunned by states for their ability to suggest a heterogeneous past where communities exist, but the nation does not.

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<sup>4</sup> H.K. Bhaba, “Narrating the Nation”, in Bhabha, H.K. (ed.), *Nation and Narration* (Routledge: London and New York, 1990), 1.

*Finding Singapore's Second World Wars*

This chapter tracks the emergence of Singapore's national Second World War by outlining the nature of war commemoration on the island. It demonstrates how the Singapore state has proved to be adept in harnessing war memory as a means to shore up its own political legitimacy and to construct a coherent story of the past that is intended to tamper racial divisions by fostering a sense of belonging, even though it arrived relatively late into the field of war remembrance. I hope to show how public war remembrance in Singapore has moved progressively away from existing in plural forms connected to distinct, specific conflicts towards a story that is narrated around a common, unifying conflict. However, these developments have not, I argue, come at the expense of how the Second World War is remembered in private spheres. Even in interventionist regimes, it is simplistic to assume that the state is solely responsible for the proliferation and staging of all war remembrance, and it is not my intention to suggest that war remembrance in Singapore exists within a hegemonic paradigm. On the contrary, I show how a variety of other sources, including private war memories, allows scholars to trace the contours of a very different political landscape in a way that allows us to avoid dehistoricising the nation. Societies are never utterly subservient and malleable. Nor are they ever as cohesive as their national stories articulate them to be. This is particularly true in Asia where the region's colonial past has resulted in problematic imaginary lines on maps that demarcated the possessions of the old colonial order. Many of these lines have carried over to the present, and now denote the borders of post-colonial nation-states. Within these borders individuals from different communities experienced and remember the same historical events differently, and affairs that are as complex and traumatic as wars are ripe fields for schisms between what is remembered by the nation, and what is historical for individuals. Three examples follow.

Ho Weng Toh was born in 1921 near Ipoh in Malaya. He was sent to Hong Kong for his university studies and was attempting to complete a degree in engineering when the Second World War came to the British Crown Colony in December 1941. Making his way first by boat then by truck through to the unoccupied Chinese city of Guilin, serendipity eventually allowed him, along with other Malayan Chinese, to volunteer for a new Allied flying group on the China-Burma-India front. By late 1944, Ho was piloting American bombers over the Chinese southwest in

support of the Allied campaigns to stave off Japanese advances both there and in India.

Ho's story is remarkable not just for the nature of his experience, but also because it does not conform to the stories associated with Singapore's national Second World War. The histories of Singapore's war are usually configured entirely around the Japanese invasion and occupation of Malaya. The population was, the story goes, caught up in an imperial war that they had little connection with, united as victims under a callous and exceptionally barbarous regime, and therefore came to desire self-rule over colonial rule.<sup>5</sup> The Japanese Occupation is cast as the undisputed centrepiece of the experience of the war, serving as a key plot device in the historical narrative of the nation. Singapore's war is thus situated exclusively in a particular geographical space with boundaries defined by post-colonial borders, and defined through the national story's ultimate end—that is, state sovereignty. Yet Ho's story challenges the dominant paradigm by taking the story of Singapore's Second World War out of that definitive space. His is a story about the ideologies of diaspora, and Ho's story is part of a wider history that reflects a reality beyond the comprehension or concern of post-colonial nationalism.

There is evidence of similar stories scattered across ordinary households in Singapore and Malaysia, as well as in international repositories. Housed in the Public Records Office in Kew, London, are the records of one Sergeant Chew Teng Soon of Singapore, a pilot with the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve. On 5 September 1940, he was in action with No. 17 Squadron over Debden, England. The combat report from Fighter Command of the incident reads as follows:

F/O Count Czernin led Yellow Section consisting of Sgt. Griffiths—Yellow 2 and Sgt. Chew—Yellow 3 to attack the rear vic formation of He.III's. Yellow 1 and 2 delivered beam attacks on No's 2 and 3 of the formation respectively, Yellow 3 keeping rear guard... Yellow 1 then attack (sic) remaining He.III from abeam, and saw his under-carriage drop, and his starboard engine stop. Yellow 3 followed with similar attack, after which e/a burst into flames and went down with pieces falling away from it.<sup>6</sup>

Chew left no memoirs, nor was he publically lauded in service histories in postwar Singapore. But we can piece together some information about

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<sup>5</sup> D. Wong, "War and Memory in Malaysia and Singapore: An Introduction", in Lim, P.P.H. and Wong, D. (eds), *War and Memory in Malaysia and Singapore* (Institute of South-east Asian Studies: Singapore, 2000), 6.

<sup>6</sup> Public Records Office AIR50/9.

his life from records housed in the British National Archives and others in the Royal Air Force's holdings. We know he was born in Singapore and arrived in England for his studies in 1938. We know he volunteered for the RAF shortly after war broke out in September 1939, and that he indicated on his enlistment forms that he had "some flying experience with mono engine plane", which suggests private flying lessons at some point in his earlier life. We know he flew with No. 17 Squadron RAF between mid-1940 and late 1942, when he was shot down by German fighter aircraft over the English Channel and presumed to have died.<sup>7</sup> That no other entries appear under his files seems to confirm this.

Another entry, this time in the supplement to the *London Gazette* on 17 March 1944, details an equally fascinating story of a pilot from Singapore at war in distant lands. Flying Officer Tan Kay Hai of No. 225 Squadron appears in the *Gazette* as a recipient of the Distinguished Flying Cross. His citation follows:

This officer has completed a large number of sorties in the Middle East theatre and has displayed exceptional ability, great courage and devotion to duty. In February, 1944, he was detailed to reconnoitre various targets south of Rome. Despite heavy fire from the ground defences and the presence of many enemy fighters, Flying Officer Tan completed his missions with success. The following day he accomplished another fine performance when he engaged several enemy batteries and a concentration of mechanical transport. His record is worthy of high praise.<sup>8</sup>

His log books from the RAF reveal to us that Tan—one of over one hundred pilots from Singapore who served in the RAF—flew more missions over France as the Allies landed in Normandy on 6 June 1944, before being shot down and captured three weeks later. He escaped captivity by early 1945, and made his way back to his squadron just before the end of the war in Europe. Following the surrender of Japanese forces in the Pacific, Tan returned to Singapore where he was later made Wing Commander of the Malayan Auxiliary Air Force.

We know far more about Tan than we do of Chew in no small part due to the former's granddaughter's deep interest in his story, and her access to family oral histories. This is a powerful history that lends itself to defining the motivations of particular constituencies of Chinese during the Second World War and what they felt the conflict stood for—whether

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<sup>7</sup> Details obtained from Chew Teng Soon's service record as held by RAF Disclosures at RAF Cranwell, Sleaford.

<sup>8</sup> Supplement to the *London Gazette*, 17 March 1944, p. 1282.

it was the defence of empire or a sense of duty to Nationalist China. But despite his leading role in the establishment of what would come to be the Republic of Singapore Air Force, Tan's story is a noticeable omission from the nation's air force museum today.

These and other stories of Singapore's Second World Wars as fought by the Chinese from the island—but also *away* from it—remain outside of the mainstream of war remembrance and commemoration in Singapore today, which remain anchored to local sites of violence and conflict, as well as spaces of colonial humiliation. The old Ford factory where the British signed the surrender of their forces was fully restored in 2002 as an interactive museum that highlights the incompetence of the British High Command in organising the defence of the island. At the War Memorial Park in downtown Singapore, four identical seventy-metre pillars, each signifying one of the four racial classifications used by the government following independence in 1965 (Chinese, Indian, Malay, Eurasian/Other), tower from the base of the memorial. These symbolise the idea of shared and equal suffering at the hands of the Japanese among the four racial groups during the occupation. The Malay Regiment's bitter stand at Pasir Panjang ridge in the last days of the Japanese assault on the island was memorialised in the form of a national interpretive centre in 2002, housed within a two-storey colonial bungalow at Bukit Chandu. As geographers Hamzah Muzaini and Brenda Yeoh observed from listening to the guided talks, the chief message of the centre is to honour the Malay Regiment for its defence of what would come to be, for Singaporeans, their country.<sup>9</sup> Yet despite the plenitude of memorials dedicated to the experience of the Second World War, this nationalised remembrance of the island's wartime past is a relatively new phenomenon, as we shall see later in this chapter.

### *Ethnicity and Remembrance in Post-Colonial Southeast Asia*

The characteristics of how Singapore's war is remembered speak to wider trends in war remembrance throughout the Asia-Pacific region. In their volume on the remembering of the Pacific war *Perilous Memories*, T. Fujitani, Geoffrey White, and Lisa Yoneyama argue that the politics of

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<sup>9</sup> H. Muzaini and B. Yeoh, "War Landscapes as 'battlefields' of collective memories: reading the Reflections at Bukit Chandu, Singapore", *Cultural Geographies* Vol. 12, 2005, 348–349.

decolonisation throughout Asia at the end of empire have meshed with the histories and memories of the war, and that the national histories of the Second World War in Asia are also, at once, histories of decolonisation and nation-formation.<sup>10</sup>

The violence of invasion and 'liberation' as well as the politics of the Cold War created periods of transition whereby the identities of the disparate colonised communities throughout Asia were subject to great stresses.<sup>11</sup> Being Chinese for example was potentially deadly in Malaya in the aftermath of invasion, while being Malay was hazardous in the months following Japan's surrender, when roving mobs sought retribution for what was perceived as complicity in racially-specific atrocities. The proclamation of the People's Republic of China and a new 'Chinese International' saw Chinese once again become a dangerous label as questions were raised about the nature of diasporic loyalty. Historian Wang Gungwu suggests that the Western retreat from empire, especially in Southeast Asia where most of the Chinese resided, witnessed the sensations of anti-colonial nationalism metamorphose into "forces which would not tolerate any kind of foreign enclave nationalism in their newly independent countries."<sup>12</sup> Under the pressures of post-colonial nationalisms that stressed the importance of homogeneity, Chinese who were still pondering the currency of their identification with mainland China were obliged to privilege local national causes. Those who did not embrace these new nationalisms were threatened with deportation or worse, as was the tragic case of hundreds of thousands of Chinese in Indonesia.<sup>13</sup> Allowing the public submergence of private memories and actions belonging to alternative political loyalties became essential to ensuring continued existence as citizens of the new post-colonial states.

As imperial systems of rule came to an end after 1945 in the face of nationalist movements, new local elites emerged in their place and reconfigured the identities of indigenous communities to suit national projects of unification. In some cases, these elites were often groups who had a long-running historical relationship with the departing colonial order, and thus had power handed to them. In other instances, they were those who

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<sup>10</sup> T. Fujitani, G. White and L. Yoneyama (eds.), *Perilous Memories: the Asia-Pacific War(s)* (Duke University Press: Durham, N.C., 2001), 9.

<sup>11</sup> Fujitani, White and Yoneyama (eds.), *Perilous Memories*, 10.

<sup>12</sup> G. Wang, "Migration and New National Identities", in Sinn, E. (ed.), *The Last Half Century of Chinese Overseas* (Hong Kong University Press: Hong Kong, 1998), 3.

<sup>13</sup> Wang, "Migration and New National Identities", 3–4.



were able to mobilise the support of one of the Cold War superpowers most effectively. Regardless of the strategy adopted, history became a way for these embryonic regimes to construct a persuasive reason for their leading role in the new order following the end of empire. The past was, therefore, used in national remembrance activities to naturalise the authority of specific constituencies within the new nation. In Sukarno's Indonesia this entailed the homage to *Pancasila* during national commemoration. It was comprised of common values, ostensibly sprung from a history shared by the archipelago's ethnically and religiously diverse inhabitants, and deployed as the binding force of the new nation centred on Java. In Malaya, the politics of the Cold War cemented the future of Malay-dominated sultanate rule. In Singapore, similar concerns by the British Military Administration over the Communist insurgency resulted in legislation and security actions that marginalised the predominantly Chinese Left, and enabled the rapid emergence of a conservative, English-educated and ethnically-plural elite. Through these processes, the identities, histories, and languages of the citizenry were actively brought into line with the ideology of homogenisation by the ruling regimes, with public contradictions marginalised or expunged. Debates raged in what would come to be Malaysia throughout the late 1940s and 1950s about whether or not the Chinese ought to have citizenship rights, and to what degree, in the new federation. The Chinese written script was banned from public spaces in Indonesia, as were Chinese religious rites, and Chinese Indonesians were required to adopt an Indonesian name for public use. In Chinese-dominated Singapore, English became the language of governance and education, with Chinese second equal as an official language alongside Malay and Tamil.

Unlike what was happening in much of Asia, most notably in South Korea, Burma, and India where commemorations of the Second World War quickly emerged in political importance within a decade of the war's end to drive nationalist narratives, the vocabulary of post-colonial nationhood in Singapore and Malaysia did not draw initially from the memories of the Pacific War. For the Malaysian state, the Emergency came to be deployed as the critical moment of succession from colonial to post-colonial governance, while in Singapore the expulsion of the state from the Federation of Malaysia in 1965 was the starting point for the national story, at least until the mid-1980s.<sup>14</sup> S. Rajaratnam, then Foreign Minister,

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<sup>14</sup> D. Wong, "Memory Suppression and Production", in Fujitani, T., White, G. and Yoneyama, L. (eds.), *Perilous Memories: the Asia-Pacific War(s)* (Duke University Press: Durham, N.C., 2001), 229.



explained the Singapore state's take on the de-emphasis of pre-1965 history in an interview with journalists in 1984:

Until very recently Singapore's past was a matter of supreme indifference for most Singaporeans simply because they believed this island never really had a history worth remembering... because all of that history was British colonial history... Patriotism required that we performed some sort of collective lobotomy to wipe out all traces of 146 years of shame.<sup>15</sup>

In October 1966, just over a year after Singapore's independence, a brief article in *The Straits Times* carried the triumphant proclamation that the Japanese and Singaporean governments had reached an agreement on a compensation for Japan's occupation of the island (the Singapore government was asked not to refer to the money as war reparations, and signed an agreement renouncing any future claims) to the value of US\$ 25 million in payment, and an equal amount as a low interest financial loan.<sup>16</sup> The timing was understandable. Foreign investment was seen to be critical in kick-starting Singapore's stagnant economy, and Japanese firms looking to outsource components of their production process made ideal candidates for courtship. "It is important that we put this dark episode behind us," then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew announced, "so we can now look forward to a future as economic partners."<sup>17</sup>

Lee's words were not just obligatory to the occasion; as part of the Singapore state's acceptance of compensation, he insisted that all Chinese clan organisations publically recognise that the matter of Japanese atrocities against the Chinese on the island was forever closed, so as to not impede Japanese business investment.<sup>18</sup> In exchange, some of the money was channelled into funding a war memorial to the Chinese war dead, but with an important caveat. The new Civilian War Memorial, located at the centre of the War Memorial Park along Beach Road, was transformed from a memorial that was originally conceived by Chinese community leaders to commemorate the 25,000 Chinese civilians executed by Japanese troops during the occupation, into a monument dedicated

<sup>15</sup> Cited in Wong, "Memory Suppression and Production", 230.

<sup>16</sup> *The Straits Times*, 22 October 1966; see also H. Hirakawa and H. Shimuzu, *Japan and Singapore in the world economy: Japan's economic advance into Singapore 1870-1965* (Routledge: London and New York, 1999), 214.

<sup>17</sup> H. Hirakawa and H. Shimuzu, *Japan and Singapore in the world economy: Japan's economic advance into Singapore 1870-1965* (Routledge: London and New York, 1999), 214-215.

<sup>18</sup> K. Blackburn and K. Hack, *War Memory and the Making of Modern Malaysia and Singapore* (NUS Press: Singapore, 2012), 292.

to all civilians killed during the invasion and occupation, regardless of ethnicity. This arrangement was conceived as a means to avoid igniting any lingering racial tensions between the Malays and the Chinese on the island.<sup>19</sup> This early homogenisation of the country's war history would set the tone for remembrance later.

### *War Remembrance before 1992*

The acceptance of the Japanese government's payout and its conditions was a clear indicator that the state was convinced then that the conflict did not need to be mined aggressively, either for political capital or to construct a national narrative of the past that advantaged the ruling party. But the war's absence from the foreground of domestic politics did not translate into a forgetting of the conflict among the citizenry, as relics of the past reminded Singaporeans about the conflict almost on a daily basis. Right up until the 1980s, unexploded Japanese bombs and shells or British ammunition caches were regularly uncovered during preparatory work for building projects. In Labrador Park, the old 6-inch batteries that guarded Singapore's southwest from the Japanese naval assault that never came served as a popular photograph backdrop for countless local and foreign visitors to the area.

Mnemonic devices such as these also inspired remembrance activities in the face of political forgetting. The relatively secluded grave of Lim Bo Seng, a Chinese resident of Singapore who was promoted posthumously to the rank of Major-General by the Republic of China government for his resistance against the Japanese in Malaya, generated enough curiosity among daily joggers in MacRitchie Reservoir to inspire a brief article in *The Straits Times* in 1977 about his exploits, and how Lim's remains were transferred from his war grave in Malaya after the Japanese surrender to the MacRitchie site in 1946.<sup>20</sup> At the looming Shuanglin Monastery in Toa Payoh—a focal point for those Chinese in Singapore who volunteered to serve as drivers on the Burma Road between 1937 and 1941—curious onlookers would gather to witness annual prayers conducted for the monastery's war dead, including its abbot who was executed by the Japanese for his part in organising the training of the drivers and the raising of

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<sup>19</sup> G.B. Lee, *The Syonan Years: Singapore Under Japanese Rule 1942–1945* (National Archives of Singapore and Epigram Pte Ltd.: Singapore, 2005), 327.

<sup>20</sup> *The Straits Times*, 20 April 1977.

funds for the Republic of China government in the war against Japan.<sup>21</sup> In Punggol village, where four hundred Chinese civilians were massacred by the Japanese in late 1942, local residents made it a point to present offerings during the Hungry Ghost Festival each year so as to appease the souls of the dead, a ritual that was also performed at the Civilian War Memorial by other relatives of those missing or killed.<sup>22</sup> In the Malay settlement at Pasir Panjang, not far from the final position of the Malay Regiment, villagers commemorated the memory of the fallen through religious ceremonies each year, until the settlement itself was moved to make way for new container wharves in the 1960s.<sup>23</sup>

The remnants of Singapore's other Second World Wars are not limited to material relics or sites of violence and memorialisation. In the absence of veteran's associations that championed, commissioned, or inspired service histories, the private memories of war veterans and survivors were kept alive as oral histories retold to friends and kin. While Winkie Ho's war service with the Chinese-America Composite Wing was never formally recognised by the state, since it was regarded as service in the military of a foreign country, his exploits were retold time and again through the decades to his children and grandchildren, and in uncounted get-togethers with his Singapore Airlines student-pilots that earned him their ungrudging respect as a pilot who had vast experience in intense flying conditions.<sup>24</sup> Li-Er Hanson grew up with household stories of her grandfather Tan Kay Hai's service with the RAF in England, and at one point was inspired to write a book about him. When her grandfather passed away in 1991, her family paid for a detailed obituary in *The Straits Times* that described his service and awards to the Singapore public.<sup>25</sup> Jimmy Chew, a technician with the RAF Far Eastern Command who was captured in Java by the Japanese while fleeing to Australia after the fall of Singapore, relived his Second World War innumerable times through the rest of his life as he sought to explain his physical scars to his friends

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<sup>21</sup> See C.W. Chan, *Light on the Lotus Hill: Shuang Lin Monastery and the Burma Road* (Khoo Chee Vihara: Singapore, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> See for instance *The Straits Times*, 15 February 1972 and *The Straits Times*, 16 August 1982.

<sup>23</sup> *The Straits Times*, 12 February 1960; See also H. Muzaini and B. Yeoh, "War Landscapes as 'battlefields' of collective memories: reading the Reflections at Bukit Chandu, Singapore", *Cultural Geographies* Vol. 12, 2005, 345–365.

<sup>24</sup> Author's interview with Ho Weng Toh, 6/9/2008.

<sup>25</sup> *The Straits Times* 2 November 1991.

and family.<sup>26</sup> Tan Kim Soon, a truck driver for the Chinese army on the Burma Road, made it a point to meet for a meal at least once a year with fellow survivors—a ritual that continues to this day.<sup>27</sup> Chai Tong Tee, a member of the controversial Chinese volunteer regiment ‘Dalforce’ at Kranji during the invasion, only told the stories of his affiliation to a trusted few for decades out of a fear that he would be identified as a member of the Malayan Communist Party and deported by the Singapore authorities.<sup>28</sup> By contrasting, Tan Choon Keng confided the darkest secrets of his Second World War to anyone who would listen. As a doctor pressed into service with the Japanese Army on the Burma-Thailand Railway, Tan was forced to set fire to a camp of Asian slave labourers who had been infected with cholera. To his deep frustration, whenever he retold the story his listeners would recoil in horror, but none ever seemed to show enough empathy at the reasons for his actions.<sup>29</sup>

These public and private acts of remembrance and retelling remind us that the relationship between war memory and history is not an easy one in Singapore. There is ample evidence to show that war remembrance and commemoration, while excised from the national stage until the early 1990s, persisted in localised and heterogenous forms. It continued to exist in everyday life, marginal to the national story. More importantly, these stories of remembrance did not cohere as a national story. Instead, because they involved commemorations of specific sets of conflicts—between Japan and Nationalist China, or Britain, or the United States—they crossed national boundaries and connected with war experiences elsewhere.

### *The Emergence of Singapore’s National Second World War*

Throughout the late 1960s and the 1970s, the modern history of Singapore barely featured in primary and secondary school curricula. Nor was there any attempt by the state to organise war remembrance activities. The People’s Action Party (PAP) looked to distance itself from its colonial roots (though several of its English-educated founding members were educated in the United Kingdom) and had little time for history. But this

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<sup>26</sup> Interview with Jimmy Chew dated 27/9/2001, Imperial War Museum, Asc No. 24222.

<sup>27</sup> Author’s interview with Tan Kim Soon, translated from Mandarin, 28/1/2009.

<sup>28</sup> Author’s interview with Chai Tong Tee, translated from Mandarin, 1/2/2010.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Tan Choon Keng dated 10/2/2001, Imperial War Museum, Asc No. 23733.

was to change by the first half of the 1980s. The teaching and staging of national history, previously ignored in both the national curriculum and in the state's political lexicon, began to be of interest to the Singapore government. Historians Lysa Hong and Huang Jianli astutely tie this development to the political capital evident in the country's confident celebrations of twenty-five years of self-governance in 1984. With economic prospects finally looking promising after decades of uncertainty, for the first time a National Exhibition, entitled "25 Years of Nation-Building, 1959–1984", presented to the public the triumphant story of Singapore as a nation that survived against all odds.<sup>30</sup>

The shock defeat of the PAP's candidate Pang Kim Hin by Joshua B. Jeyaratnam of the Worker's Party in the Anson by-elections in 1981, which broke the PAP's monopoly on electoral seats since 1965, also seems to have jolted the Singapore state into considering strategies to deploy history to buttress its legitimacy. Jeyaratnam's successful defence of his seat in Anson in 1984 heightened anxieties within the ruling government that Singaporeans were at risk of 'forgetting' the importance of the party in masterminding Singapore's successful economic development.<sup>31</sup>

1984 proved to be a watershed for national history-making when, alongside the National Exhibition, the first ever Singapore history textbook, which spanned Raffles' arrival in 1819 to full independence in 1965, was also introduced in Singapore schools—the first time since 1972 that history was taught as a standalone subject in the school syllabus.<sup>32</sup> It was the quintessential creation story, focusing on how the forefathers of students came to the island, battled difficult economic and political conditions, were inspired by the Japanese invasion to fight for self-rule, and thus helped forge modern Singapore.<sup>33</sup> Just as importantly, the PAP's triumphant victory over Communist elements and its new policies of industrialisation bookended the new text, signalling to students that 1965—the

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<sup>30</sup> L. Hong and J. Huang, *The Scripting of a National History: Singapore and its Pasts* (Hong Kong University Press: Hong Kong, 2008), 5.

<sup>31</sup> A. Lau, "The National Past and the Writing of the History of Singapore", in Ban, K.C., Pakir, A. and Tong, C.K. (eds.), *Imagining Singapore* 2nd edn. (Eastern Universities Press: Singapore, 2004), 43–44; and C.M. Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819–2005* 3rd edn. (NUS Press: Singapore, 2009), 333.

<sup>32</sup> Wong, "Memory Suppression and Production", 230.

<sup>33</sup> Hong and Huang, *The Scripting of a National History*, 5–6.

birth of the new nation—marked the triumphant dawn of ordered modernity and deliverance from the forces of chaos.<sup>34</sup>

Under the direction of the PAP, the Oral History Unit was set up as early as 1979 with the principal focus of interviewing the elite of Singaporean society (chiefly pioneering politicians, civil servants, and entrepreneurs) in order to preserve their advice and wisdom for future generations.<sup>35</sup> This was broadened to encompass the perspectives of ordinary people during the Japanese occupation in 1985, and then of the lived experience of ethnic minorities in Singapore such as the Armenians, Eurasians, Peranakans, and Jews. Yet as Kevin Blackburn points out, the interviews were highly constrained, with a series of deterministic questions that subordinated the life story of an individual to the national narrative, and were designed to simply elicit a chorus or refrain to ‘add colour... [and reaffirm] the story of Singapore’s national history.’<sup>36</sup> In the interviews with survivors of the occupation, Blackburn notes, interviewees were merely asked to comment on what they saw and witnessed insofar as Japanese brutality and local suffering was concerned. Little attention was paid to their lives before or after the war.<sup>37</sup>

While the Second World War gained some measure of state attention through the Oral History Unit’s project, it was only in 1992 with the 50th anniversary of the fall of Singapore that a national Singaporean Second World War formally took shape. The National Museum hosted a hugely successful exhibition entitled “Syonan-to” (“Light of the South”, the Japanese name for its Singapore colony during the occupation) which emphasised the lessons learnt from the ineptness of the British plans for defending the island—namely, that the war had convinced the residents of Singapore that they could not depend on others for their defence.<sup>38</sup> In preparation for the 1995 commemorations that would mark the 50th anniversary of the end of the Pacific war, the Ministry of Defence set up a committee to identify sites that were important during the war. Eleven were eventually identified, and throughout 1995 remembrance ceremonies were consecutively staged with great public fanfare to mark the opening of

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<sup>34</sup> T. Harper, “Lim Chin Siong and The Singapore Story”, in Tan, J.Q. and Jomo, K.S. (eds.), *Comet in Our Sky: Lim Chin Siong in History* (Vinlin Press: Kuala Lumpur, 2001), 6.

<sup>35</sup> K. Blackburn, “History from Above: The Use of Oral History in Shaping Collective Memory in Singapore”, in Hamilton, P. and Shopes, L. (eds.), *Oral History and Public Memories* (Temple University Press: Philadelphia, 2008), 32.

<sup>36</sup> Blackburn, “History from Above”, 34–35.

<sup>37</sup> K. Blackburn, “History from Above”, 35.

<sup>38</sup> Muzaini and Yeoh, “War Landscapes as ‘battlefields’ of collective memories”, 347.

these new sites and their integration into Singapore's national past.<sup>39</sup> At each ceremony, the standard script of remembering how naïve the colonial citizenry had been in expecting others to defend their freedom was driven home. On Sentosa Island, the famous 15-inch calibre fortress guns that protected Singapore's seaward approaches—in 1941 by far the most powerful and formidable pieces of coastal artillery ever sited in the British Empire—had a plaque placed on their mountings which reminded visitors of the folly of having defences that pointed the wrong way. This was an old myth, a legend told among circles of military *grogards* that predated the 50th anniversary commemorations. In reality, the fortress guns fulfilled the role that they were designed for by forcing Japanese planners to dismiss the possibility of an invasion from the sea. Furthermore, the guns could traverse a full 360 degrees, and were used to good effect to defend the island's landward approaches during the Japanese assault on Singapore when both the Japanese 18th Division, during their advance on Tengah airbase in the island's west, and the Imperial Guards, whilst forcing a crossing at the causeway spanning the Straits of Johor, came under attack, blunting both Japanese initiatives and buying precious hours for evacuation.<sup>40</sup> Nonetheless, the legend was seized upon by the National Heritage Board as a worthy hook for the national story. At the memorial, the blurb on the plaque stressed the need for the nation to be able to defend itself, rather than rely on others to do the job (badly). The theme of colonial ineptitude was too compelling to be dismissed, even in the face of historical inaccuracy, and was an opportunity to service the national narrative.

In the lead-up to the 50th anniversary commemorations, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong further underscored the new importance of the conflict in Singapore's national past by noting the lessons within the experience that younger Singaporeans could learn from. What the population took from the war, Goh noted, was to desire independence, and the war set in motion a struggle for self-rule—a struggle that was ongoing, and relevant to 1990s Singapore:

The 44 months of Japanese Occupation were a period of terror, fear and atrocities. It was also a period of bravery, patriotism and sacrifice... From these events and in memory of these men and women, we learn to honour

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<sup>39</sup> Wong, "Memory Suppression and Production", 230–231.

<sup>40</sup> M.H. Murfett, J. Miksic, B. Farrell, and M.S. Chiang, *Between Two Oceans: A Military History of Singapore From First Settlement to Final British Withdrawal* (Oxford University Press: Singapore, 1999), 167.



that quality of bravery when others around are giving up, the need to stand firm and not wilt in the face of enemy advance, and the fortitude of enduring hardship in the dark hours . . . If we want peace, we must work for it, and if necessary, fight and die for it. We may seek the help of others, but, in the end, we must rely on ourselves . . . Without struggle, there is no Singapore.<sup>41</sup>

We can track the rise of Singapore's national Second World War through an examination of the level of importance ascribed to the anniversary of the fall of the island, 15 February. Up until 1992, the anniversary was largely noted by civilians who organised religious prayers and food offerings to the spirits of the deceased. But on the 50th anniversary of the fall of Singapore, the PAP government announced that the day was to be designated Heritage Day, to convey the message of the island's diverse races bonding to defend the island and, in doing so, win their freedom from foreign rule.<sup>42</sup> By 1998, the day had been rebranded as Total Defence Day. Embedded into the anniversary now was the idea of helplessness among the colonised citizenry, the fragility of peace and racial harmony, the need for unity, and—through the legitimating of the need for national service—the importance of the nation-state being able to defend itself. Alongside the new-found importance of 15 February was the rise in prominence of war history in Singapore's schools. War sites on the island became closely integrated into narratives in history text books while school trips to war memorials, known as 'battlefield tours' and 'learning journeys', became a normal feature in secondary school curriculum.<sup>43</sup>

The creation of a national Second World War and its insertion into public spaces and vocabulary needs to be understood within the context of the 'economic miracle' that the developmental state had engendered. Public war remembrance was a response to the idea that an economically successful nation-state without 'a history' was soulless, and it was based on a notion that the war could be, as Muzaini and Yeoh argue, "pressed into the service of nation-building, reworked as a prelude to nationalism."<sup>44</sup> In other words, the war was now the first act in Singapore's national story. Any sense that the war was experienced in a heterogenous way was submergded under the weight of the state's official take on the war. Blackburn,

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<sup>41</sup> *The Straits Times*, 10 February 1992.

<sup>42</sup> Blackburn and Hack, *War Memory and the Making of Modern Malaysia and Singapore*, 10.

<sup>43</sup> Blackburn and Hack, *War Memory and the Making of Modern Malaysia and Singapore*, 325.

<sup>44</sup> Muzaini and Yeoh, "War Landscapes as 'battlefields' of collective memories", 347.



for instance, observes that the testimony of Tan Yen Hoon, a Chinese clerk during the war who was interviewed by the national Oral History Centre, was disingenuously edited when it was presented as a quotation in an exhibition about the occupation to highlight how it was in fact the Japanese who sowed divisions and discord between the Malay and Chinese communities on the island with insidious lies about each other.<sup>45</sup>

Another strategy employed by the Singapore government to construct a national Second World War was to identify local war heroes among the colonised citizenry. These were men and women who had been involved in resisting Japanese rule, and whose stories could be woven into the narrative of nascent nationalism. Lim Bo Seng was one of the earliest to be identified as a local war hero by the state. In the lead-up to the 50th anniversary commemorations, on 6 February 1992 *The Sunday Times* carried a special two-page report on his life and wartime activities.<sup>46</sup> Ten days later (the day following the commemoration of the fall of Singapore), *The Straits Times* followed up that article with a special interview with one of Lim's children in a piece entitled "Papa the hero".<sup>47</sup> In 1995, a biography prepared in collaboration with the National Archives, *Force 136: Story of a WWII Resistance Fighter*, celebrated the exploits of Lim and his comrades. More importantly, it explicitly referred to Lim as a Singaporean, rather than a Malayan Chinese or as a Chinese who resided in Singapore, who was "willing to lay down his life to win back his country."<sup>48</sup>

A different source of local war heroes proved to be more controversial for the Singapore state. The Malay Regiment's actions at Pasir Panjang Ridge appeared ideal for the state's heritage arms to demonstrate a national claim over the war by showcasing 'Singaporeans' engaged in a life and death struggle with the invaders.<sup>49</sup> It was also an opportunity to paper over frayed ethnic tensions that resulted from parliamentary comments made in 1987 by then-Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, who doubted the commitment of Singaporean Malays to defend the nation in the event of war with Malaysia.<sup>50</sup> Integrating the memory of the Malay Regiment's last stand into the national war was therefore an ideal strategy for reconciling questions of loyalty within the new national narrative that

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<sup>45</sup> Blackburn, "History from Above", 42.

<sup>46</sup> *The Sunday Times*, 6 February 1992.

<sup>47</sup> *The Straits Times*, 16 February 1992.

<sup>48</sup> See C.T. Tan, *Force 136: Story of a WWII Resistance Fighter* (Asiapac Books: Singapore, 1995).

<sup>49</sup> Muzaini and Yeoh, "War Landscapes as 'battlefields' of collective memories", 349.

<sup>50</sup> *The Straits Times*, 23 February 1987.

commenced with the Japanese invasion as a precursor to post-colonial nationhood.

However, the potential for the memorial to focus only on a specific ethnic community in the battle for Singapore sat uncomfortably with the PAP regime which, through a raft of policies drawn up since independence, had long attempted to downplay public events and rhetoric that emphasised the role of one ethnic group over all others. The homogenising of the Civilian War Memorial's message from one that was specific to the Chinese to one that presented a shared, multi-ethnic experience described earlier in this chapter is a powerful example of such wariness. Hence the design of the Pasir Panjang memorial came to incorporate representations of other ethnic groups in Singapore. The paintings of a former Chinese resident of Pasir Panjang village, as well as mock telephones through which visitors could listen in on interviewees of all ethnic groups narrating their experiences of the invasion and occupation, became prominent features at the memorial.

Controversy also followed the highlighting of the Malay Regiment's role in Singapore's national Second World War when the Malaysian government also claimed the memory of the soldiers for its own nation-building project. Many of the soldiers were indeed originally from the Malay Peninsula itself, including most famously one of the officers, Lieutenant Adnan Saidi. A locally-designed Malaysian assault vehicle was named 'Adnan' by the Malaysian defence ministry in his memory, while the Malaysian government conferred a posthumous medal for bravery.<sup>51</sup> Two documentaries were made of Saidi and the Malay Regiment, one in Malaysia in 1999 and one in Singapore in 2001. The Malaysian documentary emphasised Saidi's formative years growing up in Malaysia, and extrapolated a message that the virtues of the Malay Regiment's soldiers came from being inherently 'Malaysian'. The Singapore documentary focused entirely on the battle at Pasir Panjang, staging it as a battle to defend the homeland with no discussion about where the soldiers came from. In 2003, commenting on the regiment's memorial at Pasir Panjang, the Malaysian government argued that the Malay Regiment that fought there was later renamed the Royal Malay Regiment and brought into the Malaysian army, and hence should be thought of as a Malaysian formation.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> H. Muzaini and B. Yeoh, "War Landscapes as 'battlefields' of collective memories: reading the Reflections at Bukit Chandu, Singapore", *Cultural Geographies* Vol. 12, 2005, 351.

<sup>52</sup> *The New Straits Times*, 20 June 2003.

*Diasporas at War*

These challenges over the national ownership of war memories are significant as they demonstrate how problematic the projection of homogenising and anachronistic claims can be in post-colonial contexts. Neither Singapore nor Malaysia existed as political entities in 1941. Nor could the soldiers of the Malay Regiment or Lim Bo Seng and his comrades have made sense of affairs in terms of these political institutions. Yet these claims (and counter-claims) are merely the tip of the proverbial iceberg.

Equally important to questions about whose stories are included are questions about the absences in Singapore's national Second World War. Just as the Singapore state has been anxious about downplaying ideas of ethnicity in its national narrative of the past, the state has also been apprehensive about casting heroes whose loyalties were openly in contrast with the needs of the post-colonial state. This uneasiness was clear for all to see in the aftermath of Malaysia's challenges over the memory and meaning of Adnan Saidi when Singapore's then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong declared, "[Since] Adnan [Saidi] has been made a role model and an inspiration for the Malaysian armed forces as well [it] would reduce his suitability as a national hero in Singapore."<sup>53</sup> Tan Kay Hai's absence from the Republic of Singapore Air Force's museum has been noted earlier. In similar fashion, the wars experienced by Ho Weng Toh and the Burma Road volunteers remain outside of the nation's Second World War due to an affiliation with governments and war stories that are seen to have no place in Singapore's official creation story.

In the face of exclusion from a powerful state-centred narrative, the members of the diasporas that went to war have looked to alternative channels to connect with histories and memories that resonated with their own lives. Tan Kay Hai attended a reunion of pilots for RAF No. 225 Squadron in England in the early 1970s after at first declining numerous invitations following the end of the conflict. Ill health and the sheer distance involved, however, prevented him from making subsequent trips. In similar fashion, Ho Weng Toh turned to his former comrades' national commemorations for annual opportunities to affirm the validity and significance of his memories. Each year, the pilots of the Chinese-America Composite Wing would gather for a reunion on VJ (Victory over Japan)

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<sup>53</sup> Cited in Muzaini and Yeoh, "War Landscapes as 'battlefields' of collective memories", 351.

Day, alternating in Taiwan and the United States. Ho himself received a medal for his service from the Republic of China government in Taiwan, and—like the other Malayan Chinese who served in the Wing—is included in the Taiwan regime's official registry of pilots who flew for China in the Second World War.

Yet living with and accommodating Singapore's national Second World War has left an indelible impression on the memories of the veterans whose war experiences fell outside of the national narrative. Ho began his interview with me asking why his service had never been recognised in the state-sanctioned versions of the conflict, yet towards the end of our first interview his reflections revealed a fascinating overlap between personal and public memories when he declared that he was uncertain if he was telling me anything that was relevant to the history of Singapore's Second World War because "our flying stories...are not relevant to my country."<sup>54</sup> Likewise, Tan Kim Soon's memories of the war were reshaped to fit the narrative of Singapore's national war, with the Burma Road driver noting that the war fought in Burma was one that was fought on behest of a foreign power, China. The war that was fought "at home was the important one."<sup>55</sup> The anachronism was clear: 'home' was post-colonial Singapore.

If there is a need to address the absence of the communities that Tan Kay Hai, Ho Weng Toh, and Tan Kim Soon were historically affiliates of in the dominant narratives of remembering Singapore's war experiences, then it has less to do with 'completing' a picture, and more to do with us gaining an understanding about the complex, interlinked processes before, during, and after the war that drove a particular kind of historical myopia. What is clear is that there is not one, but multiple Second World Wars, such as Singapore's national Second World War, which has been crafted to fit neatly within the nation-building project; or the Malay Second World Wars, which span a continuum of experiences from co-option with the Japanese to defending the symbols of the British Empire; or the Chinese Second World Wars, which are shaped by loyalties to Nationalist China, or Communist ideology, or the English Crown.

These are of course far from the exhaustive limits of the different Second World Wars that exist in private memories and public memorials in Singapore. But if we think about the Second World Wars as conflicts

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<sup>54</sup> Author's interview with Ho Weng Toh, 6/9/2008.

<sup>55</sup> Author's interview with Tan Kim Soon, translated from Mandarin, 28/1/2009.

experienced by members of diasporas, instead of being cast as post-colonial creation wars, and if we consider as sources the evidence left behind by these diasporas at war—in archives and repositories internationally, but also in private memories, localised remembrance practices, personal collections, and sites of history—then the heterogeneity that is provided by these sources allows us to mine far richer meanings of imagined belonging and diasporic life in colonial and post-colonial worlds. The stories of the Chinese diasporas that went to war between 1937 and 1945 are defined by ideological affiliations to overseas political centres. In the years since, however, these ties have been steadily displaced by a newer process, that of localised, almost parochial post-colonial nationalism as well as an anachronistic and homogenising narrative furnished by the Singapore state. The ideology of the nation-state has served to enclose the historiography of Singapore's war in a way that structures historical thinking. This book is intended as a call for historians to challenge the process. In the chapters to follow, we will divorce the singular, post-colonial national narrative from history and, in doing so, rediscover the diasporas and their other Second World Wars.



### CHAPTER THREE

## BRITAIN, CHINA, AND THE CREATION OF CHINESE DIASPORAS IN MALAYA

The involvement of the Chinese of Malaya in disparate conflicts between 1937 and 1945 emerged from older processes of empire and migration. By the eve of hostilities between Japan and China, and Germany and Britain, the Chinese community was deeply embedded into a web of networks and affiliations. These associations meant that individuals tended to gravitate towards one of two centres—Britain, or China. This chapter offers a longer historical survey of the formation of these two constituencies in the lead-up to the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese and European wars, and tracks the forces that determined the construction of loyalties towards empire or nation. It provides a canvas against which we can begin to understand how decisions were made by individuals in later chapters about which affiliations they valued most, and for which they were willing to stake their lives. As we shall see, these choices were not always straightforward. And despite powerful forces that ought to have logically pushed a person to favour one connection over the other, nor were they choices that one might expect—a result of the fluid and complex nature of life among the diaspora.

Narratives of how Chinese migration to Malaya began are often interwoven with legend. The *Sejarah Melayu* (*Malay Annals*) describes how the Tianshun Emperor of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) dispatched a princess of his court, Hang Li Po, along with five hundred attendants to Malacca to seal an alliance between the Malacca Sultanate and the Ming court in the early fifteenth century through marriage. According to this story, the attendants of the princess settled in Malaya, and their descendants became known by contemporaries and historians as the *peranakan*, or the Straits Chinese:

[W]hen she appeared, Sultan Mansur Shah . . . gave orders that she embrace the faith of Islam. And when this had been done, Sultan Mansur Shah married the princess, daughter of the Raja of China . . . And the five hundred sons of Chinese ministers were bidden to take up their abode at Bukit China: and the place goes by that name to this day. It was they who made

the well at Bukit China, and it is their descendants who are called “the Chinese yeoman”.<sup>1</sup>

There is little historical evidence to suggest that this is factual. For a start, no documents from the Ming court suggest that a princess by the name of Hang Li Po ever existed, nor do records refer to a marriage between a member of the Ming court with a foreign ruler from the Nanyang. The Ming never adopted the practice of marriage diplomacy since that would have signified a measure of equality between royal houses, and it would have been unlikely that a Ming emperor would have regarded the Malacca Sultanate (or indeed any power) as an equal. Ideologically the Chinese dynastic system operated on the recognition of the emperor as the Son of Heaven, with China—the ‘Middle Kingdom’—at the centre of the cosmos. It was not possible for the imperial court to assume that a ruler chosen by Heaven to rule the universe’s premier kingdom could have a peer.

Until the conclusion of the First Opium War in 1842, Chinese migration to Malaya, and the Malay Archipelago more broadly, was unremarkable in its scale. Cultural practices and expectations made migration an unappealing prospect for many. The act of leaving Chinese lands permanently was widely regarded in traditional Chinese society to be the ultimate act of betrayal in a culture that valued few things higher than filial piety and ancestral worship. One needed to be able to return to the family’s village of origin to perform rites on special occasions in memory of one’s ancestors, even if it was only done infrequently. To leave and settle in distant lands and never return therefore seemed to be unforgivable, likely to bring down a curse by the spirits of one’s ancestors upon subsequent generations. This cultural attitude towards migration was so widespread that there was no precise term in the Chinese language for a person who had settled abroad, at least until the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup>

For those who were less concerned with cultural norms, departure through China’s ports was a stringently managed process. Passes for overseas travel were only issued to embassies or merchants who were involved in state-sanctioned trade expeditions. As late as 1842, a centuries-old imperial edict which decreed the act of leaving China by ship without a pass a crime punishable by beheading was enforced, and so very few Chinese left

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<sup>1</sup> *Sejarah Melayu*, trans. by C.C. Brown (Oxford University Press: London and New York, 1970), 82.

<sup>2</sup> G. Wang, *Don’t Leave Home: Migration and the Chinese* (Eastern Universities Press: Singapore, 2003), 57.



the kingdom by sea until this law was officially repealed in 1860 (for men) and 1893 (for women).<sup>3</sup> Exceptions did exist, such as in the province of Fujian in China's southeast. The governor there had obtained permission from the Ming court in 1567 to license fifty junks to trade legally to a number of ports in the Nanyang (increasing to eighty-eight after 1589). Tentative trading routes from China to Southeast Asia had been established during the Southern Song (1127–1279) and Yuan (1279–1368) dynasties, but it was only under Ming rule that large and frequent trading expeditions were dispatched, with the largest fleets consisting of three hundred ships carrying close to thirty thousand men.<sup>4</sup> Maritime historian Anthony Reid has noted that imperial port records indicate that these junks always carried significantly more men outward than on their return voyages, and over a period of several decades Chinatowns populated by traders and craftsmen began to emerge in key ports of destination throughout the Nanyang region. By the turn of the seventeenth century, around three thousand Chinese lived in Patani on the Malay peninsular. Similar numbers were resident in Hoi An (in southern Vietnam), Banten, as well as Batavia in the East Indies.

Foreign invasion and dynastic upheaval, along with the creation of trade passages, also resulted in small accidental Chinese enclaves forming throughout the Nanyang region. As trading junks were wrecked or captured by pirates, the survivors of encounters with treacherous reefs and those who found freedom from their captors through cash or flight formed a sprinkling of communities throughout the region, often integrating with the local population where hybridised cultural practices developed. To defend key sea passages along its trade routes, the Ming court also stationed coastal garrisons in sites such as in Palembang and the Kinabatangan region in Brunei. When that dynasty collapsed in the face of a foreign Manchu invasion in 1644, the garrisons found themselves isolated by a new Chinese state that had little interest in maintaining contact with them or allowing these troops to return home even as civilians. Some of these exiles harboured fantasies of fighting to end Manchu rule and returning a Ming emperor to power, but realistically they were far too few in number and too dispersed to threaten the new Qing dynasty. The end result was that when the Ming dynasty gave way to the Qing in

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<sup>3</sup> S. Chang, "The Distribution and Occupations of Overseas Chinese", in Reid, A. (ed.), *The Chinese Diaspora in the Pacific* (Ashgate: Aldershot, 2008), 34.

<sup>4</sup> M.C. Ricklefs et al., *A New History of Southeast Asia* (Palgrave Macmillan: London, 2010), 119.

the mid-seventeenth century, these former soldiers eventually put down their arms, surrendered their patriotic ambitions, and melded into the local populations of the Malay Archipelago as well.<sup>5</sup>

The collapse of the Ming put a stop to the vast trading expeditions that had characterised much of that dynastic era. The Qing court was far more insular in its attitudes in comparison and, apart from allowing limited trade with the outside world to occur through a designated zone in the city of Canton (Guangzhou), was content with only receiving tributes from all who wanted the favour of the Middle Kingdom, rather than exploring broader trade relations with other powers great and small. This ended the already sporadic contact between the Chinese scattered throughout Southeast Asia and the Chinese mainland that had been originally facilitated by the arrival of merchant fleets from China. Hence between the mid-seventeenth century and the third quarter of the nineteenth century, any relationship that the Chinese diaspora imagined that they had with the Chinese state—and more specifically, the Qing government—was not reciprocated, simply because the imperial court had no interest in these communities. Without a state to offer support or backing, the overseas Chinese were a vulnerable people living on what social, economic, and technical capital they could introduce to the power-holders of the lands they found themselves in.<sup>6</sup>

In what would eventually come to be Malaya, there is, regardless of the fallibility of the *Sejarah Melayu*, considerable archaeological and documentary sources to conclude that by the time the Ming dynasty collapsed there was a small but significant Chinese presence largely centred on Malacca, and that this was by far the largest concentration of Chinese throughout the peninsular until the founding of Singapore during the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> It is likely that the first Chinese who arrived were shipwrecked seafarers or deserting sailors from various Ming trade fleets to Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean. Over time, small numbers of illegal Chinese traders who had come to Southeast Asia in defiance of Qing maritime laws probably came to settle as well.<sup>8</sup> A relaxing of the ban on overseas trade by the imperial court in 1727 to boost economic development in

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<sup>5</sup> A. Reid, "Introduction", in Reid, A. (ed.), *The Chinese Diaspora in the Pacific* (Ashgate: Aldershot, 2008), xvii.

<sup>6</sup> Reid, "Introduction", xvi.

<sup>7</sup> See A. Vervoon, *ReOrient: Change in Asian Societies* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> Reid, "Introduction", xvi–xvii.

the maritime provinces brought more Chinese to Malacca.<sup>9</sup> We also know from the same sources that these Straits Chinese, so-named because of Malacca's position along the important sea passage between Sumatra and the Malay peninsular, found it necessary to increasingly orient themselves away from China politically and culturally given the complete lack of interest in any aspect of their welfare. Instead, they were happy to embrace the locally-dominant political force. For a time, this meant the Portuguese (who had deposed the Malacca Sultanate in 1511), followed by the Dutch (who seized Malacca in 1641 as part of a campaign to drive the Portuguese out of the archipelago).

### *The Crown at the Centre*

Shifting constellations of power both globally and regionally by the end of the eighteenth century would bring about a new political and cultural orientation among the *peranakan*. The East India Company's acquisition of Penang (1786), the creation of a settlement in Singapore (1819), and the exchange of Bencoolen for Dutch Malacca (1826) introduced British policy and influence to the Malay peninsular. Neither the Company nor Britain had much reason to expand into the sultanates that lay beyond these port settlements until the latter part of the nineteenth century, when a particularly lucrative global demand for tin (which was widely available throughout the hinterlands of the peninsular) emerged after the canning of food became popular practice both in European armies and households. But as it was, even the task of governing these three towns, referred to and administered by the British collectively as the Straits Settlements, was too vast for the relatively small number of British officials to assume for themselves, and hence they sought out allies among the local population who could fill clerical and petty government roles within each settlement's administration. They found the *peranakan* ready collaborators in the running of empire.

What would come to be a profitable symbiotic relationship was made possible for a number of reasons. The confident grandeur of British military, political, and intellectual prestige won Britain many admirers among the Straits Chinese residing in the settlements. Many *peranakan* welcomed British (and non-Chinese) influence since, as a community, they

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<sup>9</sup> Ricklefs et al., *A New History of Southeast Asia*, 121.

were distant from identifying with China due to the lack of a reciprocal relationship with the Chinese state. They practiced a set of everyday cultural traditions that melded local and Chinese influences, perhaps best captured in the language of the household—a Malay patois known as Baba Malay which incorporated Chinese and Portuguese words.<sup>10</sup> Straits Chinese society was the product of a process of constant hybridisation over a relatively short span of time, and so built into *peranakan* culture was a readiness that made it adaptable to new influences. For the Straits Chinese, the British were just the latest in a string of European powers to shape their lives and activities, but they were certainly the most advanced and impressive ones yet. As was the case when first the Portuguese and then the Dutch arrived, there seemed to be much for the Straits Chinese to gain by bringing themselves into orbit with the new colonial regime.

The British were happy to reciprocate by regarding the Straits Chinese as conduits of imperial power in the running of the Straits Settlements, and transforming those who were not co-opted into the colonial regime on an official basis into an entrepreneurial class that was distinct from the rest of the Asian population. Leading members of the Chinese community were invited to bid for the right to levy tolls and taxes on behalf of the colonial authorities, and to tender for control over the equally lucrative business of licensing for brothels and gambling dens.<sup>11</sup> But the most important economic pillar of all in the Malayan colonial institution was opium revenue farming, and it was through this system that the Straits Chinese elite and the settlement authorities gained the most through association. Individuals were encouraged by the government to submit bids promising to pay the government a fixed rent each month in exchange for the right to run an opium farm for the colonial government, with farms usually awarded to the bid that provided the highest rent return to the authorities. The winning bidder was given exclusive and highly lucrative rights to process raw opium into *chandu* (smokeable opium) and to sell the opium to consumers. So lucrative and important was this system for both the British and the Chinese opium farm-owners that from 1824 to the beginning of the twentieth century the Straits Settlements (and later,

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<sup>10</sup> S.K. Lim, “*The Peranakan Baba Nonya Culture: Resurgence or Disappearance?*” *Sari*, Vol. 26, 2008, 163.

<sup>11</sup> C.F. Yong, *Chinese Leadership and Power in Colonial Singapore* (Times Academic Press: Singapore, 1992), 25–26.

the colony of Malaya) was heavily dependent on revenue from the farms.<sup>12</sup> Such systems of revenue farming came to characterise the nature of the imperial economy in Malaya, with British rulers depending on a particular community of Chinese to run day-to-day economic affairs.

Having established themselves as successful traders or landowners prior to the arrival of the British, the *peranakan* were the first among the local common populace who were able to afford the fees of Western-styled institutions of education being introduced by British missionaries and scholar-administrators throughout the Straits Settlements. Many were eager to send their own children, and often the children of less affluent kinfolk, to newly-established Western schools such as the Anglo-Chinese College in Malacca to study English, which was regarded by the Straits Chinese as the language of status and economic opportunity. The graduates from these institutions found that they were sought after by British employers as junior but comparatively well-paid administrators of the colonial regime.<sup>13</sup> Large numbers of Straits Chinese were therefore able to transform their advantage of having an English education into greater socio-economic mobility, which strengthened their identification with the British Empire.

There was also a growing intellectual curiosity among the scholar-administrators of the Straits Settlements with what were perceived to be racial characteristics among the inhabitants of the Malay Archipelago. John Crawfurd, a physician with an interest in polygenism who was appointed First Resident of Singapore from 1823 to 1827, personified the attitudes of several British administrators of the day. The supposed Chinese racial traits of being naturally industrious and capable of “vast endeavours with little relief”, coupled with their historical knowledge of local markets, made them valuable partners in the building of the imperial economy. Of the Chinese, Crawfurd noted in his *History of the Indian Archipelago* that he entertained “so high an opinion of the industry, skill and capacity of consumption of the Chinese, that I consider one Chinaman equal to the value to the state of *two* natives of the Coromandel Coast and to four Malays at least (emphasis in the original).”<sup>14</sup> This was a view echoed by another scholar-administrator, the Resident Councillor of Penang William

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<sup>12</sup> C. Trocki, “Drugs, Taxes and Chinese Capitalism in Southeast Asia”, in Brook, T. and Wakabayashi, B.T., *Opium Regimes: China, Britain, and Japan 1839–1952* (University of California Press: Berkeley and London, 2000), 81–82.

<sup>13</sup> Yong, *Chinese Leadership and Power in Colonial Singapore*, xvi.

<sup>14</sup> Cited in Trocki, “Drugs, Taxes and Chinese Capitalism in Southeast Asia”, 85.

Maxwell, who also noted in a report to Whitehall that the Straits Chinese were, in comparison to the rest of the Asian population, “far more enlightened” as they combined both ‘Chinese traits’ and British civilising influences.<sup>15</sup>

The special relationship between the *peranakan* and Britain, as well as Straits Chinese interest pursuing Western education, gave rise at the end of the nineteenth century to a new university-trained professional class that was heavily dominated by Straits Chinese. In 1889 the colonial authorities created a scheme, known as Queen’s scholarships, to send the best young minds from the Asian population in Malaya to universities in the United Kingdom. Among the most prominent beneficiaries of this scheme were Lim Boon Keng (who studied medicine in Edinburgh) and Song Ong Siang (trained in law in London). Upon their return to Singapore both helped create the Straits Chinese British Association, an organisation that was meant to encourage warmer ties between the *peranakan* and the colonial authorities.<sup>16</sup>

With the ascent of British prestige in the world, an association with the empire provided the Straits Chinese with much cultural capital in everyday life, particularly in their own dealings with other colonial communities and the position that they felt they belonged to within the British imperial order. An appreciation of English literature and Western classical music, dressing in Western clothing, and conversion to Christianity were all considered fashionable by many Straits Chinese. The Straits Chinese Recreation Club was founded in 1885, with facilities for tennis, billiards, and later, cricket.<sup>17</sup> Partaking in Western cultural practices were signs of modernity held by the *peranakan* community to denote that they were, as a result of their closeness with the British, more advanced than other colonised citizenry. Tan Che Ser, a *peranakan* lawyer from Singapore, wrote to his wife in 1899 while on a visit to Victorian London describing his feelings when he arrived at the centre of a world system that he felt proud to belong to:

If only you could see how wonderful this city is! I think you would agree with me that people like us feel more at home here than [in Singapore]... The women here have refined accents and the most lavish, fashionable ward-

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<sup>15</sup> S. Yao “Patience, Endurance and Fortitude”: Ambivalence, desire and the construction of the Chinese in Colonial Singapore’, *Critical Arts*, Vol. 10 (2), 1996, 60.

<sup>16</sup> C.M. Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819–2005* (NUS Press: Singapore, 2009), 115.

<sup>17</sup> Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 116.

robes... The men with their impressive moustaches stride with a seriousness that must inevitably come from the weight of running the world... in our capital, the splendour of Her Majesty's empire is everywhere.<sup>18</sup>

This growing identification with the Crown as the centre became apparent in frequent public displays of loyalty. In 1887, the Straits Chinese British Association in Singapore presented a statue of Queen Victoria to the colonial government as part of the colony's celebrations of her Golden Jubilee. In appreciation, Governor Cecil Clementi Smith ordered that the statue be placed prominently in the grand dining room of Government House. Victories of the British Empire, such as the capture of Pretoria in 1900 and the end of the Boer War, were spontaneously celebrated by the community with processions and music throughout the colony.<sup>19</sup> At Edward VII's coronation in 1902, the Straits Chinese were represented by Song Ong Siang and Lim Boon Keng. Following the celebrations, *peranakan* leaders in Malaya pledged themselves as the 'King's Chinese' in a public speech, to rapturous applause.<sup>20</sup> The power of the British Empire seemed permanent and unshakeable. For the Straits Chinese, that could only be a good thing.

### *The Opium Wars and Chinese Migration*

In 1839 a diplomatic dispute between Britain and China, primarily over the sale of opium in Canton by the East India Company and its agency houses, resulted in war between the two powers. A British victory was almost certainly a foregone conclusion given the disparity in weaponry available to the opposing armies. What made matters worse was the state of moral and intellectual decay that was prevalent throughout the Qing dynasty's governing institutions, which crippled the imperial court's ability to make appropriate diplomatic responses to crises, as well as its capacity to organise itself and the country's resources for war against a formidable foe.<sup>21</sup> By the time this first 'Opium War' had concluded in 1842, British forces had captured Amoy (Xiamen), Ningbo, Zhapu, and Hong Kong while more

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<sup>18</sup> Letter from Tan Che Ser to Tan Bee Siu, 5 April 1899 (From the Tan family's personal collection).

<sup>19</sup> Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 116.

<sup>20</sup> Yong, *Chinese Leadership and Power in Colonial Singapore*, xvi–xvii.

<sup>21</sup> P.W. Fay, *The Opium War 1840–1842* (University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 1997), 221–223.



troops were threatening the capital Beijing, as well as the major population centres of Nanjing and Tianjin.

The Treaty of Nanjing, drawn up following the ending of hostilities in August 1842, was the first of a number of unequal treaties signed between China and foreign powers over the next half century. It conferred a raft of benefits on the British while offering no advantages to China. Apart from the payment of war indemnities, the cession of Hong Kong, and the granting of extraterritoriality to all British subjects in China, the Nanjing Treaty also compelled the Qing court to allow British merchants to reside and trade freely in five coastal cities: Canton, Amoy, Shanghai, Fuzhou, and Ningbo. These ports came to be known in both treaty legalese and common-speak as 'Treaty Ports', with ten more opening up in 1860 as a result of the Second Opium War fought against Britain, France, Russia, and the United States.<sup>22</sup>

China's defeat in the Opium Wars transformed the nature of Chinese migration. The number of Chinese departing by sea, for centuries limited by legislation and cultural attitudes to a tiny trickle of illegal or accidental migrants, began to surge following the signing of the Treaty of Nanjing. This was driven and enabled by a number of factors. A combination of natural disasters, economic depression, a decline in court efficiency, and rebellion created the impetus among ordinary Chinese, particularly in the southeastern provinces of Guangdong and Fujian (which were worst-affected by both man-made and natural catastrophes) to leave for better prospects overseas.

During the eighteenth century, China's population had doubled from 150 million to 300 million. This was enabled by a period of prolonged peace and economic prosperity, as well as an absence of epidemics. The nutritional intake of ordinary Chinese had also improved through the availability of imported crops previously absent from Chinese diets, leading to increased survival rates of newborns and infants.<sup>23</sup> However, this population explosion was not matched by the Qing state's ability to deal with the problems that growth of this scale and speed introduced. Population increase had gradually encouraged migration away from fertile but densely-populated river deltas regions to more hilly regions, where there was less competition of land and resources. As hillsides were cleared for

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<sup>22</sup> J.A.G. Roberts, *A History of China, 2nd Edition* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 68.

<sup>23</sup> K. Pomerenz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the making of the modern world economy* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, New Jersey, 2000), 243–245.



farming erosion and flash flooding became more common among the lower deltas of the Yellow and Yangzi rivers, but the Qing court's engineering responses to the growing frequency of environmental crises was often slow and disorganised.<sup>24</sup> A succession of devastating natural floods and powerful earthquakes that affected the central plains and the south-east also killed tens of thousands and left many more homeless.<sup>25</sup> Rebellions against the Qing dynasty, such as the Taiping Rebellion of 1850–1864 were commonplace—driven by a sense among rebel leaders that the dynasty was in terminal decline. The Taiping Rebellion in particular, which involved nearly thirty million peasants, badly damaged the agrarian economies of both Guangdong and Fujian. Both Qing and Heavenly Kingdom troops adopted a 'scorched earth' policy for the territories that they abandoned, destroying anything useful to the other side and ruining farmland. Together, the frequent flooding, earthquakes, and mass rebellions created widespread famine throughout the southeast.<sup>26</sup>

The southeast provinces of the country also suffered from a severe economic downturn with the designation of Shanghai as a Treaty Port. This was especially true for Canton, the capital of the Guangdong province. British and Western merchants favoured Shanghai due to its location at the mouth of the Yangzi river, which made it ideally-placed for trade with the Chinese interior. Its proximity to Beijing as well as to key Japanese and American ports strengthened its case as the new financial focal point of foreign interests in China. Yet Shanghai's rise came at the expense of Canton; with merchants moving their operations north *en masse* after 1842, tens of thousands of porters and boatmen in Canton were put out of work, while the local economy (which had become dependent over the centuries on the presence of foreign merchants) was badly hit.<sup>27</sup> Within a short space of time, Guangdong province was gripped by economic depression and much of the population was rendered destitute.

Perhaps most importantly of all, the Industrial Revolution that was sweeping through the West at this time had created a lucrative demand for raw materials—the most profitable of which were often accessible to the British as these were already present within the borders of the empire, or within easy reach. Yet the extraction of resources such as gold, tin,

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<sup>24</sup> Roberts, *A History of China*, 168.

<sup>25</sup> Pomerenz, *The Great Divergence*, 244.

<sup>26</sup> J. Warren, *Ah Ku and Karayuki-san: Prostitution in Singapore* (Singapore University Press: Singapore, 2003), 25.

<sup>27</sup> Roberts, *A History of China*, 171.

cotton, pepper, tea, gambier, opium, and sugar was labour-intensive work, far too demanding for the comparatively few Britons who were present at the distant corners of the British world to undertake on their own. Slavery was no longer a viable option due to moves towards its complete abolition throughout the colonies, meaning that an alternative source of labour needed to be found. The answer lay in importing labour to the parts of the empire that needed it. The granting of extraterritoriality to British merchants and operatives in China meant that ships entering and leaving the Treaty Ports were no longer policed by Qing customs officials. In accordance with the terms of the treaty, anything held in the cargo holds of British ships could not be seized; nor could British ships and their crews be detained for violating Chinese laws. Chinese subjects who wanted to leave China despite strict laws on unsanctioned port departures, therefore, could do so with impunity on board any British (and later, Western) ship that was willing to take them. Now that the Treaty Port system allowed British ships to ignore customs, China's vast population could be tapped to provide more labour for the empire.

Working closely with savvy Chinese businessmen, the British employed a credit ticket system to draw impoverished coolies into the colonies. The credit ticket system was capital-efficient and elegant in its simplicity. When a need for labour was identified, coolie brokering companies operated by Chinese entrepreneurs would be contracted to travel through the villages of Fujian and Guangdong to recruit labourers for the task. When enough hands were gathered, they would be sent to one of the Treaty Ports to board a ship that had been commissioned to transport the coolies. As most of the coolies lacked the ability to pay for their voyage, the brokers would pay for their tickets first, thus placing the coolie in debt to the broker. When the coolies arrived at their destination, this debt would be bought out by the employers that had ordered them. In exchange, the coolie signed a contract agreeing that a section of his salary would be deducted each payday—usually between half and three-quarters of it—until the debt was paid off with compound interest.<sup>28</sup> This system of indentured labour proved to be immensely cost-effective in the building of both personal and political empires during the second half of the nineteenth century, since the relatively small investment of capital in procur-

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<sup>28</sup> J. Warren, *Pirates, Prostitutes and Pullers: Explorations in the Ethno- and Social History of Southeast Asia* (UWA Publishing: Perth, 2008), 154.

ing each coolie's debt was offset by the sizable gains offered by interest returns and the global resource trade.

The chance to leave shattered lands and broken lives behind for economic opportunities brought hundreds of thousands of Chinese into Malaya. The flow of migration was slow at first; between 1842 and 1850 only forty-five thousand Chinese left via the Treaty Ports. But over the next few decades the number of migrants began to increase dramatically, pushed by the start of the Taiping Rebellion as well as the increased frequency of natural disasters, and pulled by the growing efficiency of coolie broker networks and the credit ticket system. Between 1851 and 1860 over a hundred thousand boarded vessels for overseas destinations. Over the following decade, this number increased eight-fold.<sup>29</sup> During this time, the Chinese population of the Straits Settlements grew proportionately as officials and merchants, British and Chinese alike, capitalised on the availability of cheap coolie labour. For instance, in 1830 around fifteen thousand Chinese resided in Singapore. By 1860 this had increased to over fifty thousand, and to nearly a hundred thousand by 1870.<sup>30</sup> The first census of British Malaya, conducted in 1881 as more and more of the Malay peninsular came under Crown rule, provides us with a dramatic map of the number of Chinese arriving throughout the colony over the next six decades leading up to the Second World War, as Table 3.1 illustrates.

Table 3.1 Chinese migrant arrivals to Malaya by decade, 1881–1939

Year	No. of Chinese arriving
1881–89	1,145,682
1890–99	1,520,995
1900–09	1,894,262
1910–19	1,689,582
1920–29	2,301,869
1930–39	1,265,074

Source: S.M. Lee, "Female Immigrants and Labor in Colonial Malaya: 1860–1947", *International Migration Review*, Vol. 23 (2), 310.

<sup>29</sup> P.P. Lee, *Chinese Society in 19th Century Singapore* (Oxford University Press: Kuala Lumpur, 1986), 85–86.

<sup>30</sup> These figures have been rounded off; see *Straits Settlements Gazette, 1881*, Tables A and B, 300–323.

The migratory surge had the effect of creating a second, much larger and culturally-distinct Chinese community in Malaya. Joining the more established and anglicised *peranakan* were the new waves of migrant Chinese, known by their contemporaries as the *sinkeh* or 'new guests'. A few came from successful mercantile backgrounds and made the voyage to the Nanyang to explore commercial prospects. Others only made their fortunes when they arrived, through serendipitous encounters with opportunities that the region presented. But, overwhelmingly, most were indentured labourers who had come to Malaya to work, and remained so until the end of their stay.

While the *peranakan* were co-opted into the colonial regime, the British government in Malaya took little interest in the welfare or ideals of these new China immigrants. The labour they provided was crucial, and the enterprises the richer *sinkeh* were operating were important cogs in the Malayan economy. Yet to most British colonial officials the languages the new migrant workers conversed in were alien, their cultures and traditions strange or even sinister. The coolies seemed content to insulate themselves in clannish communities. Few had any intention to remain longer than they needed to. Rather, the hope that united them was the desire to find work and send regular remittances of their savings to kin back in their villages, before returning home permanently. And so their lives and ideals remained connected to China by hopes, dreams, and economic ties.

### *Overseas Chinese Nationalism*

The dramatic increase in the number of Chinese residing abroad after 1842 was not matched, at least for the next three decades, by an interest on the part of the Qing government. Faced with Western aggression as well as concurrent uprisings from 1851 to 1877 by its Nien and Muslim populations and the establishment of the rebel Taiping Kingdom, the imperial court's attention was firmly fixed on dealing with pressing affairs at home that threatened its very existence. Furthermore, until the end of the nineteenth century there was no central government institution that was deputised to manage overseas Chinese affairs. Individual Chinese ministers acting as ambassadors in Europe, America, Australia, and Southeast Asia were left to make their own decisions on whether or not (and when) to concern themselves with the local Chinese population. For their part, Chinese abroad—much like the *peranakan* of Malaya—had to

make do by petitioning local powers and, as demonstrated by historian Charles McLain in his study of Chinese civil rights in mid-nineteenth century America, by employing the legislature of their host countries where possible to protect their rights.<sup>31</sup>

It was only after international outcry among Western civil libertarians over the treatment of Chinese coolies in Peru and Venezuela in the 1870s that the Qing government began to open consulates in countries where significant Chinese communities were found, with the first overseas consulate established in Singapore in 1877.<sup>32</sup> The creation of consulates finally established a relationship between the overseas Chinese and China, and these ties manifested themselves in a number of ways. The activities of consulate officials promoted a sense of national consciousness among the overseas Chinese. Consul-generals patronised local Chinese communities and businesses, and they visited Chinese schools and gave talks to students on the importance of traditional values, remaining true to their Chinese heritage, and showing loyalty to the Son of Heaven.

The reports being sent back by officials to the court indicated that there were increasing numbers of successful Chinese merchants whose business enterprises could prove beneficial to the ailing Qing economy if a relationship could be cultivated between individual merchants and the court. The more astute diplomats recognised that much of the strength of the Western colonial powers lay in trade and the activities of their merchants, which prompted a number of ministers to propose a radical shift in Confucian hierarchy. In their opinion, merchants ought to be ranked at the top of the four class groups in Chinese society rather than at the bottom.<sup>33</sup> It would be advantageous for the court to celebrate the power and entrepreneurial energy of merchants and consult them in matters of economic and foreign policy, rather than dismiss mercantile activities as simple profiteering by greedy individuals as set out in the Analects of Confucius. Along these progressive lines, Fujian migrant Chua Tse Yung's sugar enterprise in Malaya, which turned over a profit of nearly six million dollars each year, drew a glowing report from the Chinese Vice Consul in Penang in 1884 which concluded with a recommendation that Chua

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<sup>31</sup> C.J. McClain, "The Chinese Struggle for Civil Rights in Nineteenth Century America: The First Phase, 1850–1870", in Reid, A. (ed.), *The Chinese Diaspora in the Pacific* (Ashgate: Aldershot, 2008), 242.

<sup>32</sup> Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 119.

<sup>33</sup> C.H. Yen, "Ch'ing China and the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce, 1906–1911", in L. Suryadinata, *Southeast Asian Chinese and China: The Politico-Economic Dimension* (Times Academic Press: Singapore, 1995), 134–135.

should receive an honorary court ministerial rank, while another highly successful Fujianese businessman, Goh Seiw Tin, was similarly identified as being a worthy recipient of imperial honours.<sup>34</sup> In short, the establishment of consulates had the effect of giving the imperial court reason to take note of and engage with overseas Chinese communities in general.

In addition, the consulates were useful to the Qing government as instruments of surveillance. The perceived impotency of the court in the face of Western (and later Japanese) aggression had led to public calls for revolution. Even during the golden age of Qing rule in the eighteenth century, the Manchus who founded the dynasty and dominated the imperial court were always regarded as foreigners, 'barbarians' from the north who had deposed a Chinese emperor and had taken the throne of the Son of Heaven for themselves. Now, with the state seemingly moribund in the face of a string of humiliations at the hands of foreign powers and natural disasters and civil strife causing great hardship among much of the population, this foreign identity of the Qing elite became even more difficult for many Chinese to accept. A racialised patriotic sentiment began to take root: for China to be strong again, it needed to be governed not by a foreign dynasty characterised by incompetence and debauchery, but by the Chinese themselves.

From the 1880s onwards the Qing government did what it could to silence, imprison, or kill its fiercest critics and opponents. Several, though, slipped past their agents and sought refuge in Chinese communities overseas. From abroad, leading dissidents like Kang You Wei and Sun Yat Sen were free to publicly call for support for constitutional reform (in Kang's case) or outright revolution (which was what Sun advocated). Concerned, the Qing government ordered its diplomats to quash the growing influence of "agitators" by touring overseas Chinese communities to "expose the evil intentions of Kang's and Sun's gangs, and to persuade overseas subjects not to lend their support to the conspirators."<sup>35</sup> Three major missions, led by ministers Yang Shih Chi, Wang Da Chen, and Zhao Zhong Fan, were dispatched in 1907, 1909, and 1911 respectively to tour major Chinese communities in the Nanyang region with a simple message of imperial grace and reassurances that the ongoing unrest would be pacified by the court

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<sup>34</sup> *Veritable Records of the Emperor Guangxu of the Great Qing Empire*, cited in Yen, "Ch'ing China and the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce, 1906–1911", 133–135.

<sup>35</sup> Cited in Yen, "Ch'ing China and the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce, 1906–1911", 134.

in good time.<sup>36</sup> Some merchants were happy to continue offering their support to the dynasty since that loyalty was being rewarded through the awarding of imperial honours. But Kang and Sun's reasoning and passion made for convincing performances as they each travelled the world to engage with the Chinese diaspora.

The combined efforts of Kang You Wei, Sun Yat Sen, and the Qing state served to politicise much of the Chinese diaspora and created a sense of a deep vested interest in the political future of China. The consolidation of power and the quelling of unreasonable agitators advocated by the Qing ministers abroad had limited appeal, usually only among some wealthy merchants. At the same time, overseas support to transform China, either into a constitutional monarchy or a republic, began to intensify in the final decade of the nineteenth century. Ultimately, it was Sun who achieved the most success among the overseas Chinese. Most of them found his vision of complete democracy and people power (as opposed to Kang's compromise with the dynastic institution), coupled with racially-charged vocabulary that advocated a future where China would be ruled exclusively by Chinese, easy to understand.

The final decade of the nineteenth century also saw the emergence of a term in the Chinese language to refer to all Chinese who resided abroad, driven by a need among the three main parties to convey in simple terms the idea that matters in China remained relevant to the lives of all overseas Chinese regardless of where they were in the world. This word was *huaqiao*. *Hua* (which translates in English as 'Chinese') *qiao* ('a temporary stay') drew from the idea that all who had left the Middle Kingdom were sojourners. Both *hua* and *qiao* had been in use as individual characters in written script for centuries, but the two characters were paired together in this way solely for the lexicon of the revolutionary era.<sup>37</sup> Built into this new term for overseas Chinese was the principle of *jus sanguinis*, claiming as Chinese nationals all people of Chinese blood through the male line—essentially the cornerstone for trans-national Chinese ethno-nationalism. Duty, to both one's ancestors and the nation, created an obligation for all overseas Chinese to return one day.

*Huaqiao* was used by Qing ministers, Kang You Wei, and Sun Yat Sen to court overseas Chinese support from around the turn of the twentieth

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<sup>36</sup> Yen, "Ch'ing China and the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce, 1906–1911", 134–135.

<sup>37</sup> G. Wang, "A note on the origins of Hua-Ch'iao", in Reid, A. (ed.), *The Chinese Diaspora in the Pacific* (Ashgate: Aldershot, 2008), 336–341.



century, but Sun was especially successful in integrating the term into his addresses. In public speeches, he reasoned that the overseas Chinese were *huaqiao*, connected by an ancient identity that stretched across time and space. Even if they had been resident in their new homes for generations, they were still Chinese and had a responsibility to save the mother country from foreign rule and colonial exploitation. Those like the Straits Chinese who had assimilated elements of other cultures could still be 're-sinicised', since they were also *huaqiao* by blood.<sup>38</sup> The terminology and ideas behind the call for the Chinese diaspora to end their temporary stay abroad and 'return' (if not physically then at least through support of the revolution) to the home of their ancestors can best be captured in a famous contemporary doggerel, the *Song of Revolution*, an excerpt of which follows:

Let me call again to the *huaqiao* overseas,  
 Compatriots to the distant ends of the earth!  
 Only because of the need to feed yourself,  
 Did you leave home to wander the seas.  
 The pestilential Nanyang air fills the skies,  
 Life is short when the deadly fevers come.  
 Working hard in the mines making your millions,  
 Building your gardens to meet your pleasures;  
 Although the lush trees and bamboos are beautiful,  
 Longevity cannot be bought with cash.  
 You rise to serve by imperial command,  
 With a face hard as iron and as pitiless.  
 The day you take the road into the earth,  
 You are no mandarin back in your native home.  
 Your descendants remain inferior to others,  
 Without protection none can get very far.  
 What use is the accumulation of silver cash?  
 Why not use it to eject the Manchus?  
 Ten thousand each from you isn't much.  
 To buy cannons and guns and ship them inland.  
 The Manchu barbarians destroyed, peace will then follow,  
 A republican polity immediately assured!  
 The *huaqiao* can then vent their feelings,  
 And the Westerners retreat to call you brothers.  
 Much better than building fortunes and pleasures,  
 Which can do nothing when death appears.  
 It can be hard to be happy all one's life,  
 You need but a little conscience to feel shame.

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<sup>38</sup> Wang, "A note on the origins of Hua-Ch'iao", 341.



What then is the most shameful matter?  
 To forget one's ancestors involves the greatest hate!  
 If not that, to register yourself as a foreign national  
 Forgetting that you come from Chinese stock.  
 In life, you may gain an awesome fame  
 After death, how can you face your ancestors?<sup>39</sup>

Not all Chinese were convinced enough to be interested in what was happening in China. This was particularly true among many Straits Chinese, for whom the idea of being *huaqiao* did not have much appeal in terms of how they saw themselves. But there were also pragmatic reasons for being politically un-committed where the revolution was concerned. Many *peranakan* leaders were keen to avoid upsetting or alienating any party that could turn out to be the rulers of China in the long term and hence jeopardise potential business opportunities. That did not, however, stop a few like Lim Boon Keng and Tan Boon Liat (another English-educated *peranakan*) from involving themselves in a general way with revolutionary activities. When Kang You Wei fled to Singapore in 1900, Lim received him personally at the docks and offered to pay for all of Kang's expenses while he resided in the settlement, although he stopped short of backing Kang's plans to establish there a reformist group, the Party to Protect the Emperor.<sup>40</sup>

Even without extensive *peranakan* support, however, Malaya became a hotbed for both the revolutionary and reformist movements. This development was unsurprising given the large numbers of 'new wave' migrant Chinese working and residing in the colony by the turn of the twentieth century. Kang You Wei planned and raised funds for the reformist Hankou Uprising of 1900 from Penang, where he had moved shortly after his arrival in Malaya. Revolutionary insurrections in China's southeastern provinces in 1907 and 1908 were planned in Singapore. The business tycoon Tan Kah Kee, who had developed a close personal friendship with Sun Yat Sen, donated 50,000 Straits dollars to Sun's political party in 1912.<sup>41</sup> In October 1911, the successful revolt in the city of Wuchang led to widespread celebration and joy throughout Malaya, while in Singapore, young Chinese volunteered in large numbers to join the rebel army in China and fund-raising activities raised millions of Straits dollars for the

<sup>39</sup> Wang, "A note on the origins of Hua-Ch'iao", 343–344.

<sup>40</sup> Yong, *Chinese Leadership and Power in Colonial Singapore*, 99.

<sup>41</sup> C.F. Yong, "Nanyang Patriotism towards China knows no political boundaries: The case of Tan Kah Kee 1874–1961", *Archipel*, Vol. 32, 1986, 169.

rebel cause.<sup>42</sup> When the Qing emperor finally abdicated in 1912, Sun Yat Sen paid tribute to the role played by Nanyang Chinese as he took office as the republic's provisional president, calling the region "the mother of the revolution" that had given birth to a new China.<sup>43</sup> For a region and diaspora that had for so long been on the periphery of Chinese history, Sun's analogy painted a striking reversal of roles.

*Between Empire and Nation*

Just as the 1911 Revolution in China drew out the loyalty of the China-oriented Chinese population in Malaya, Britain's entry into the First World War in 1914 presented an opportunity for anglicised Chinese to demonstrate their devotion to the Crown and the British Empire. Malaya remained on the sidelines as the conflict played itself out over the next four years, with the only notable wartime action taking place when a German commerce raider, the *Emden*, sailed through the Straits of Malacca and attacked Penang Harbour along with a number of Allied merchant ships. But events in Europe were followed with keen interest among the *peranakan*. Young Straits Chinese volunteered for military service, while leaders from their community campaigned to raise funds for the National War Loan and supported a War Tax Bill (designed to levy income tax and channel funds to the war effort).<sup>44</sup> The elite made grand public gestures in ceremonies around the donating of war equipment. Straits Chinese banker Lee Choon Guan presented a fighter-plane to the British army—"Malaya No. 6"—one of nearly a dozen that were donated by wealthy merchants in the colony.<sup>45</sup>

The Treaty of Versailles at the end of the war brought about a new wave of Chinese nationalist sentiment to Malaya. The Republic of China government, having entered the war on the side of the Allied Triple Entente in 1917, had requested that German possessions in the Shandong province be returned to China, as well as the cancellation of all extraterritorial privileges enjoyed by foreigners from the West and Japan. But the requests from the Chinese delegation were ignored by the British and French delegates, and Shandong was presented to Japan instead as a reward for its

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<sup>42</sup> Yong, "Nanyang Patriotism towards China knows no political boundaries", 171.

<sup>43</sup> Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819–2005*, 123.

<sup>44</sup> Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 141.

<sup>45</sup> Teo, A. et al., *Grantmaking Entities in Singapore* (NUS Press: Singapore, 2011), 61.

role in the conflict. This decision sparked widespread protests, beginning on 4 May 1919, by students in China. Japan, the Western powers, and the weak Republican government were all vilified to varying degrees by Chinese nationalists. A movement to strengthen China by remaking the very fabric of its society—starting with the Chinese written script and the education system—began to spread within China, and then abroad to the diaspora.

The May Fourth Movement, as it came to be known, was principally brought to Malaya by teachers from the Chinese mainland's universities taking up positions in Chinese language schools throughout the colony. Change came quickly, as the archaic written script which had been in use for thousands of years (and had been deliberately designed to be difficult to learn and understand, so as to ensure that literacy was the preserve of the elite) was replaced by a simplified, more accessible form designed by intellectuals in China's major universities. More importantly, Chinese schools in Malaya became nurseries of Chinese nationalism. Classes were dedicated to promoting the qualities of patriotism towards China among its students, and it became increasingly fashionable for parents to send their children to universities in China after completing their primary and middle schooling in Malaya.<sup>46</sup>

A message of hatred against Japan was especially prevalent by the late 1920s and early 1930s in the classrooms of Malayan Chinese schools. Japan had been the object of much anger among China nationalists since the First Sino-Japanese War, fought in 1894–1895. The subsequent Treaty of Shimonoseki (another 'unequal treaty' which cost China the Liaodong Peninsula and the island of Taiwan) as well as Japan's gaining of the Shandong Province as part of the Treaty of Versailles were seen widely among overseas Chinese as unjust outcomes that needed to be righted. Japanese shops and goods in Malaya were subjected to increasingly frequent boycotts throughout the 1920s, and Japanese civilians ran the risk of being beaten up if they identified as such. In 1931, when the Japanese invaded Manchuria (which had become an outlying Chinese province after the republican revolution), anti-Japanese sentiments escalated to the point where the colonial authorities had to intervene to prevent riots from occurring.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819–2005*, 157.

<sup>47</sup> Lee, *The Syonan Years*, 209–210.

Many Straits Chinese, and indeed an increasing number of Chinese born to *sinkeh* parents, remained disengaged from Sino-Japanese disputes. A few wealthy individuals used their influence to back anti-Japanese campaigns, but most had been appalled by the corruption in the Chinese Nationalist government, as well as the violent anti-left extremism that occurred during its split with the Chinese Communist Party, when thousands of Communist Party cadre were purged in Shanghai in 1928.<sup>48</sup> The brutality of the slayings, coupled with the spill-over of intra-Chinese violence into the colony of Malaya as suspected communists were lynched, beheaded, or beaten to death by roving mobs of Nationalist sympathisers, convinced the Straits Chinese and other members of the emerging Anglophone Asian community of the virtues of British order. Many were satisfied with the view that events in China had little impact on their lives. They were, after all, modern, sophisticated citizens of the empire.<sup>49</sup> With another war appearing likely in Europe, British affairs at the centre of the empire took greater precedence.

There is a famous Chinese proverb that translates so: “A tree may grow to a thousand feet, but falling leaves will always return to their roots.” On the eve of Japanese aggression against China in 1937, the Chinese of Malaya lived between empire and nation. Two centres shaped the Chinese of Malaya, creating an imperial diaspora and a China diaspora. Each carried different and defined political and cultural meanings. For the former, it was characterised by the idea of modernity and of international prestige, which sprang from a sustained, special relationship with the British Empire. For the latter, it was the sanctity and importance of nation and race, and the idea that China’s destiny was interwoven with that of the Chinese overseas. By the 1930s, though life was more complex than simple dichotomies and there was not always a distinct line that could be drawn between the two identities, individuals, for cumulative reasons, gravitated towards one centre or the other. Thoughts of self-determination and a world beyond Britain and China were far from their minds. When war broke out in China and then in Europe, calls to arms that stirred a sense of duty to the centre pulled thousands onto long journeys back to the sources of their identities. Like falling leaves in the autumn, the Chinese diasporas would return to their roots.

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<sup>48</sup> Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 143.

<sup>49</sup> A.L. Chua, “Imperial Subjects, Straits Citizens: Anglophone Asians and the Struggle for Political Rights in inter-war Singapore”, in Barr, M. and Trocki, C. (eds.). *Paths Not Taken: Political Pluralism in Post-War Singapore* (NUS Press: Singapore, 2008), 22–26.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE SINO-JAPANESE WAR

On the night of 7 July 1937, while Japanese troops were engaging in military manoeuvres outside the historic fortress town of Wanping, southwest of Beijing, one among their number failed to report for muster at the end of the exercise. His regimental commander, Mutaguchi Renya, telephoned the Chinese garrison commander of the town, Ji Xingwen, and requested that his troops be allowed to enter the town to conduct a search for the missing soldier. Ji refused on the basis that such an act would be a violation of Chinese sovereignty, but compromised by allowing two Japanese officers to oversee Chinese troops carrying out the unsuccessful search for the missing soldier. Convinced that the missing soldier was in fact being held prisoner by the garrison, Mutaguchi gave the order for the Japanese troops in the area began firing on the town at 5 am the following morning, and ordered his men to seize a crucial crossing that the fortress was designed to protect. This bridge—the *Lugouqiao*, otherwise known as the Marco Polo Bridge because it had been the subject of detailed description by the Venetian explorer in *The Travels of Marco Polo*—became the focal point of a bitter struggle that would escalate into a Sino-Japanese war spanning nearly eight years, ending only with Japan's surrender to the Allies in 1945.

The story of the early phase of the Sino-Japanese War was one of spirited yet ineffective defence, followed by disorderly retreat on the part of Chinese troops. What began as a skirmish at the Marco Polo Bridge soon developed into a full-scale Japanese offensive, against which Nationalist forces were unable to withstand. Beijing fell within a month to advancing Japanese forces, as did the key port city of Tianjin. By November, Shanghai had been seized. The capital, Nanjing, would follow before Christmas, precipitating one of the most horrific events of the Second World War—the massacre of an estimated three hundred thousand civilians and prisoners-of-war by the Japanese.

From the commencement of hostilities, the KMT government found that it could draw on the patriotism of a vast, international diaspora that numbered in the tens of millions. While some of those of Chinese descent living abroad, particularly those that had assimilated to their local

communities over centuries, identified more strongly with other political and cultural centres, the majority of Chinese overseas who had emigrated did so from around the start of the twentieth century onwards, and tended to harbour deep, continuing interest in political events in China. These were the Chinese who would form associations so as to bring to bear on the war effort, with a level of coordination that was astonishing in scope, the myriad of skills and the resources they possessed.

The Sino-Japanese War was, therefore, not just a war contained geographically within China. Instead, once the opening salvos were delivered China's diaspora was at war as well, despite the fact that the colonies and countries they resided in were not involved in the conflict, transforming it into a global conflict in its own right. As we shall see, while there was a global response among Chinese residing overseas, in terms of the scale of monetary and labour contributions the diaspora's response was arguably most apparent in Malaya (and the Nanyang region more broadly), where the largest concentration of overseas Chinese resided. Thousands would volunteer to go to war in support of a political centre that they identified with. Even greater numbers were involved in forming a comprehensive support network to enable the war service of volunteers, who became known as the *Nanyang ji gong*. The story of those who travelled to the Burma Road as truck drivers, mechanics, and labourers allows us to understand that they were merely the most visible members of a larger community who saw themselves at war from July 1937 onwards, rather than concerned but nevertheless removed observers who were ready to be reinvented as part of a separate post-colonial nation, as they have since been portrayed in national remembrance.

### *The China Diaspora at War*

Chinese immigrants across the world who identified politically with China were unsurprisingly involved in public displays of patriotism and support in the war against Japan. Communities of Chinese had formed across Europe as thousands of coolies who had recruited by the Allies to work on the Western Front during the First World War settled across the continent once the Great War came to an end. Some remained in France and northern Europe, but many made their way to Britain. Collectively, they formed the basis of a pan-European diaspora that was still for the most part distinctly oriented towards China. This patriotic network centred on the Chinese of Britain (numerically the largest group in Europe),

but drew in other Chinese across France, Germany, Switzerland, and the Netherlands.<sup>1</sup> Even though these groups were split in their political loyalties towards either the Chinese Communist Party or the Nationalists, the war brought about a united front between the two constituencies in a fashion not dissimilar to the uneasy union between the two parties back in China.

In 1931, years before the incident at the Marco Polo Bridge, workers and merchants based in London had established an association called the Anti-Japanese Alliance in response to Japanese ambitions along China's northern borders and Manchuria. In 1933, Chinese students in the English capital set up the Chinese Students' National Salvation Association; the following year, in response to a rallying call for China patriots by Sun Yat Sen's widow, Soong Qingling, the Chinese People's Armed Self-Defence Association was formed in London. By 1936, these and other smaller patriotic movements across other British cities united into the Overseas Chinese Anti-Japanese National Salvation Association. The Association's principal aims were to raise funds for China's defence in the event of war with Japan, and to organise the return of individuals who wanted to serve in the Chinese military.<sup>2</sup> That year, a Pan-European Overseas Chinese Anti-Japanese Congress was also called in Paris, which drew over four hundred delegates from across the continent, while the Congress' outcome was the formation of a Pan-European Overseas Chinese Federation to Resist Japanese Aggression and Save the Nation. The Federation enabled and drove China nationalism in Europe, its members organising European boycotts of Japanese goods and writing letters to various European newspapers to raise awareness of the conflict. When war broke out, a volunteer military corps was formed and sent back to China to participate in the fighting.<sup>3</sup>

The surge of China nationalism among the diaspora in Europe leading up to and after 1937 was mirrored elsewhere. A North American counterpart to the Pan-European Federation was set up in 1937 following a call by the intelligentsia among the European Federation for the Chinese in Canada and the United States to do their part in the war against Japan. The North American Chinese, with a population of around seventy-five thousand, responded empathically, contributing nearly C\$51 million in war donations between 1937 and 1940. In Britain, the comparatively small

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<sup>1</sup> G. Benton and E.T. Gomez, *The Chinese in Britain, 1800–Present* (Palgrave Macmillan: London, 2007), 234–236.

<sup>2</sup> Benton and Gomez, *The Chinese in Britain*, 236–238.

<sup>3</sup> Benton and Gomez, *The Chinese in Britain*, 238.



community of around eight thousand Chinese raised over C\$5 million in the same period.<sup>4</sup>

It was East and Southeast Asia, and most notably Hong Kong and Malaya (at least until both were occupied by Japanese troops in 1941) that witnessed some of the most zealous and, in scale, the most significant overseas nationalist activity as the colonies became the focal points of China nationalism abroad. The roles they played and the contributions they made, however, evolved differently. Hong Kong's proximity to the fighting, its status as a neutral territory, the presence of over half a million refugees from the mainland, and the fall of key cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Nanjing meant that the British settlement acted as the political, economic, and labour nerve centre of the Republic of China government's war effort until December 1941, when the island and its hinterland was seized by Japanese troops. Nearly two-thirds of all war materials shipped to China from overseas came through Hong Kong via the rail link between the colony and the city of Guangzhou.<sup>5</sup> When Guangzhou was captured by the Japanese at the end of 1938, the trains departing Hong Kong were replaced by fleets of junks that looked to slip past the naval blockade.

As historian Philip Snow notes, Hong Kong hosted no less than thirty-two Nationalist government organs both on official and semi-official basis. The Ministries of Railways and Communications as well as Finance, the Bureau of Foreign Trade, the All-China Economic Commission, a Central Trust Bureau, a Government Purchasing Commission, the National Salvation Bonds and Flotation Committee, and the South-west Transportation Company (a business front of the Ministry of War that was responsible for procuring arms and supplies for Nationalist troops and directing intelligence operations) all operated in the Crown Colony, as did the Bank of China which funded the war effort by printing hundreds of millions of Chinese dollars.<sup>6</sup> In short, even though the wartime capital of Nationalist China had been shifted to Chongqing after the fall of Nanjing, Hong Kong was, in all but name, the shadow capital of the republic. That it was geographically 'overseas', and all of the political, economic, and labour activities of the China government were sponsored by or at least involved overseas Chinese in the colony, underscored the importance of the overseas Chinese to the war effort.

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<sup>4</sup> Benton and Gomez, *The Chinese in Britain*, 242.

<sup>5</sup> P. Snow, *The Fall of Hong Kong: Britain, China and the Japanese Occupation* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2004), 27.

<sup>6</sup> Snow, *The Fall of Hong Kong*, 27–29.



While the level of political and economic organisation in Malaya was far from what emerged in Hong Kong, Malaya, with its population of nearly two million Chinese, was witness to some of the most intense overseas nationalist activity among the China diaspora globally. Anti-Japanese feeling among the Chinese in the British colony had already been stoked by the Treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895, and kept alive through events such as the 'Twenty-One Demands' made by the Showa government in 1915 for special rights in northeast China, the May Fourth Movement following the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, and the annexation of Manchuria in 1931. China nationalism among Malayan Chinese therefore fed on perceived injustices against China that occurred on the international stage. But the long punctuations of calm between unequal treaties meant that Chinese nationalism did not always progress steadily between the final decade of the nineteenth century and 1937. In reality, modern overseas Chinese nationalism in Malaya was often much more ephemeral in nature. Rallies and boycotts followed each event, but then these would dissipate after several months. And as Kuo has aptly demonstrated, response to calls of overseas Chinese nationalism against the latest injustice was sometimes lukewarm at best.<sup>7</sup> Following the launch of the May Fourth Movement, for instance, several Chinese in Singapore (overwhelmingly coolies and students) chose to boycott Japanese merchandise, and in several cases wrecked stores that refused to remove Japanese-made products from their shelves. Much of the merchant elite, however, distanced itself from such visceral shows of patriotism, in no small part due to their wish to avoid the ire of the British colonial authorities, who saw the boycotts as often being closer in form to riots than political protests.

Yet despite the lack of a sustained fever of China nationalism, each new perceived injustice was added to the catalogue of humiliations suffered by first Qing, and then Republican China, and served to fuel the explosion of anti-Japanese sentiment and China nationalism in Malaya after July 1937. This new crisis involving the home country drew a response that was far more powerful and concerted than any previous incident. In Hong Kong, the organised response to the new Sino-Japanese War had largely been made possible by the presence of Nationalist government institutions that

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<sup>7</sup> H.Y. Kuo, "Recruiting Businesses through Transnationalism: Embedded Chinese Enterprise and Nationalist Activities in Singapore in the 1930s Great Depression", *Enterprise & Society*, Vol. 7 (1), 2006, 99; See also W. Gungwu, "The Limits of Nanyang Chinese Nationalism", in C.D. Cowan and O.W. Wolters (eds), *Southeast Asian History and Historiography: Essays Presented to D.G.E. Hall* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 1976), 405–423.

were harboured in the British colony. By contrast, the relative logistical sophistication of Malayan Chinese war contributions was instead made possible by the core migrant apparatus of overseas Chinese society—clan associations, chambers of commerce, Chinese schools, and, just as crucially, a vernacular press that was able to create an atmosphere that sustained passionate anti-Japanese China nationalism among local Chinese communities. Newspapers like the *Nanyang Siang Pau* and the *Sin Chew Jit Poh* dispatched reporters to China to report on the conflict. Others, like the widely circulated *Sin Kuo Min Jit Poh*, were essentially news arms of the Nationalist government in China. Some reporters focused on the suffering of Chinese civilians by giving them a voice. Interviews with refugees arriving in Hong Kong carried heartbreaking tales of exhausted or wounded mothers pleading with strangers to take their babies, and committing suicide once the infant's safety had been secured. Other eyewitness accounts described heinous atrocities committed against civilians by Japanese troops, such as the rape and murder of young women, and the beheading of hapless civilians for sport. Across the board, their coverage was, as one might expect, partisan, and designed to stir the emotions of the overseas Chinese audience that the reporters were addressing. "Today", one reporter in the *Nanyang Siang Pau* in June 1938 wrote, "I saw another four hundred brothers and sisters die in [the city of] Wuhan due to the savage methods of the Japanese army. . . . How long must these offences be allowed to continue?" Poems composed by local readers appeared consistently in the vernacular press. With titles such as "I'm Coming Home, My Motherland!", "Long live our country", and "War of Resistance to the End!", the terms 'motherland' and 'our country' became common euphemisms for China.<sup>8</sup>

Other components of overseas Chinese society allowed for a rapid and synchronised response by otherwise disparate Chinese communities across Malaya to the national crisis. Within a month of the outbreak of war, a group of high-profile Chinese merchants belonging to the Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Singapore came together to form the Singapore China Relief Fund Association, a thirty-two member committee. In the same month, the largest of the clan associations in Singapore, the Hokkien Clan Association, established a committee to investigate the most efficient ways to raise war funds and send assistance to China. Clan associations in Penang came together to form the Penang China Relief Fund

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<sup>8</sup> *Nanyang Siang Pau*, 16 January 1938, 10 April 1938, 27 May 1938, and 10 June 1938.

Association in September, while at the same time in Selangor the leaders of the Chinese associations and principals of Chinese schools created a state-wide relief fund institution.<sup>9</sup>

As a loose federation of communities headed by local merchant elites, the relief associations were a potent blend of access and know-how. The merchants that ran these associations were intimately familiar with the logistical challenges of gathering, organising, and transporting both funds and labour across the Nanyang from their business enterprises, which almost always had China components built into them. Furthermore, the clan associations and chambers of commerce provided ready-made networks through which activities could be coordinated. Many were connected to schools through philanthropic activities and heritage programs, and so the merchant networks ensured that the reach of the movement was comprehensive.

These relief fund associations had an unmistakable effect on everyday life among the Chinese residing in British Malaya, and it was impossible to ignore the Sino-Japanese War if one lived in Malaya at the time due to the energy and noise generated by the China diaspora as it mobilised for the conflict. Chinese children from middle schools were co-opted into fund-raising activities. Most of the time, they sold flowers, chanting patriotic slogans as they fanned out in large, noisy bands from their schools and into the streets. Flowers were plentiful, cheap to procure or grow in large quantities, and could be used in almost any way to construct patriotic symbolism. Red flowers stood for blood being shed for the motherland; yellow flowers represented the imperial heritage of the Middle Kingdom; white flowers symbolised lives lost in Japanese atrocities due to that colour's association with Chinese funeral rites. With the average monthly wage of a coolie labourer in Malaya a little over 5 Straits dollars, some of the flowers went for as little as a cent. More successful merchants made a show of larger contributions. Hawkers and small business owners publicly declared days when their profits were to be donated to the war effort, as did dance hostesses at various hotels and amusement centres in Singapore. A group of maids to European families in the colony pooled their income and collected 5,000 Straits Dollars for their local relief fund association. Artistically-talented Nanyang Chinese turned to performing musicals and plays to raise funds for the war. Traditional Chinese opera,

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<sup>9</sup> S. Leong, "Malayan Overseas Chinese and the Sino-Japanese War, 1937-1941", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 10 (2), September 1979, 296.

which circumvented the low levels literacy among much of the community, was a culturally recognisable and understandable medium through which patriotic rhetoric could be channelled to a wide, labouring-class audience. In addition, impromptu jingles and songs as well as less operatic plays drew eager crowds of hundreds at a time. Chinese neighbourhoods across Malaya, street corners and open fields alike were transformed into spaces of overseas nationalist discourse. Some performances, like the play *Human Nature and Animal Nature*, were explicitly about Japanese aggression in China. Others involved retelling Chinese folklore on defending the home country, invoking historical heroes such as Yue Fei, a general of the Southern Song Dynasty who defended China against Jurchen invaders during the twelfth century. The general's famous rallying cry, "Return our mountains and rivers", became the title of a hugely popular Hakka play that ran in Singapore from February 1938 onwards.<sup>10</sup>

Religious institutions, too, became involved in canvassing for cash donations. The abbot of the Shuang Lin Monastery in Singapore, Pu Liang, held prayer ceremonies for the war dead on the anniversaries of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident. Opera performances were organised on the temple's grounds with all proceeds donated to the relief funds. Chan Chow Wah has written in detail on the monastery's staging of fund raising affairs that were successful at engaging the Chinese community in Singapore., such as the Vesak Day Vegetarian Meal Fund Raising Event, which drew a crowd of nearly ten thousand visitors and raised over 10,000 Straits dollars. To enrich the patriotic colour of the occasion, the interior of the monastery was decorated with Nationalist flags, banners, and couplets while rooms were given stirring names for the day, such as the Liberation Chamber, the Resistance Chamber, the Victory Chamber, the Enemy Extermination Path, and the Relief Work Chamber.<sup>11</sup>

### *The Federation of China Relief Fund of the South Seas*

By July 1938, the relief fund movement among the Nanyang Chinese had made a powerful impression on the Premier of the Republic of China, Kung Hsiang Hsi (often referred to as H.H. Kung). Kung, who also held the

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<sup>10</sup> *Straits Times*, 6 October 1937 and 9 October 1937; and *Nanyang Siang Pau*, 29 March 1939 and 6 July 1939.

<sup>11</sup> C.W. Chan, *Light on the Lotus Hill: Shuang Lin Monastery and the Burma Road* (Khoo Chee Vihara: Singapore, 2009), 29–32.

posts of Vice President of the Executive Yuan and Governor of the Central Bank of China, urged Tan Kah Kee, as one of the leading Nanyang Chinese leaders, to organise a pan-Southeast Asian national salvation organisation. The timing of Kung's request was critical—Xiamen, the home city of many Hokkien in Malaya, had fallen to the Japanese. Communications between Nanyang merchants and labourers alike with their families back home were severed, heightening the sense of urgency about the conflict and drawing even the least nationalistic overseas Chinese into the relief movement. Tan, a Xiamen native himself, duly obliged and dispatched telegrams to the various Nanyang relief fund groups, informing them that he was organising a conference of all Southeast Asian associations at the Nanyang Overseas Chinese Middle School in Singapore on 10 October. It was a date considered especially significant, as it was the anniversary of the Xinhai Revolution that had led to the creation of the Republic of China.

One hundred and sixty-five delegates from relief fund associations and merchant groups across British Malaya and Burma, the Dutch East Indies, French Indochina, the Kingdom of Thailand, and the Philippines met at the conference, a display that, as the *Sin Kuo Min Jit Poh* described, was a dramatic “culmination of overseas Chinese unity”.<sup>12</sup> The chief outcome of the conference was the creation of a central organisation, headquartered in Singapore, which coordinated all Nanyang relief efforts, known as the Federation of China Relief Fund of the South Seas (FCRFSS). Tan Kah Kee (representing Malaya) was voted the Federation's chairman, while vice-chairs were assigned to Li Ching Chuan (for the Philippines) and Tjong See Gan (Indonesia). To seal the Federation's link with the Nationalist government, both H.H. Kung and Chiang Kai Shek were elected as honorary chairmen as well.

The relief fund movement in Malaya was undisputedly successful, and captured, in dollars and cents, the scale of overseas Chinese nationalism. Before the creation of the FCRFSS, independent associations across the Malay Peninsula were already effective in raising funds for the war effort. Between July 1937 and October 1938, Singapore's population of over half a million Chinese raised C\$5.7 million Chinese dollars in relief funds. During the same period, the diaspora in Selangor and Perak raised C\$3.8 million and C\$2.8 million respectively through statewide relief institutions. Overseas nationalist contributions in Malaya between the Marco Polo Bridge

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<sup>12</sup> *Sin Kuo Min Jit Poh*, 13 October 1938.

incident and the creation of the FCRFSS totalled nearly C\$20 million. But following the creation of the Federation, the amount of war relief funds collected increased even further as overseas Chinese nationalism was supercharged by both growing anxieties in the face of Japanese military victories and by the stature granted to the relief movement through the formal participation of influential community leaders. Between November 1938 and December 1940, the Chinese of Singapore contributed C\$9 million, with a further C\$21 million raised across the Malay states on the peninsula.<sup>13</sup>

Placed against the context of war relief funds raised across the Nanyang, the Malayan contribution outstripped, by a considerable margin, the amount raised by other Chinese communities across the region, as illustrated in Table 4.1. The funds collected in Malaya represented nearly half of the total value in Chinese dollars raised by the Federation.

Table 4.1 Nanyang Chinese contributions November 1938–December 1940

Country/colony	Funds raised (raw total, in Yuan)	Funds raised (percentage)
Malaya	30,459,164	48.71
Philippines	9,218,562	14.74
Dutch East Indies	14,046,665	22.47
Thailand	3,200,000	5.12
Burma	4,351,530	6.96
British Borneo	1,243,143	2.0

Source: S. Leong, "Malayan Overseas Chinese and the Sino-Japanese War, 1937–1941", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 10 (2), September 1979, 308.

In addition, contributions to the Federation's relief efforts brought donations in currencies other than the yuan as well. In Malaya, a considerable proportion of donations by ordinary Chinese were made in Straits dollars. In the East Indies donations were made alternatively in Dutch guilders, and in the Philippines rich Chinese merchants made contributions in the peso. Converted into Chinese dollars and factored in, the amount that the Federation gathered from nationalist contributors in total was over C\$177 million. Over C\$85 million came from Malaya alone, while donations Thailand and the Dutch East Indies accounted for over C\$30 million each.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Leong, "Malayan Overseas Chinese and the Sino-Japanese War, 1937–1941", 310.

<sup>14</sup> Leong, "Malayan Overseas Chinese and the Sino-Japanese War, 1937–1941", 308.

Apart from raising funds for the war effort, Malayan Chinese also turned to boycotting Japanese products and companies. Japanese exports such as piece goods and rubber-soled shoes had a ready market in Singapore and across the Malay Peninsula. For example, in 1932 nearly 12 million yards of artificial silk cloth were imported from Japan to Singapore at a value of over 6 million Straits dollars.<sup>15</sup> In the trade of rubber-soled shoes (including their re-exporting to the Malayan hinterland, and to Sumatra and Thailand), Japanese brands made up nearly 80 per cent of the total value of the lucrative rubber footwear trade in Singapore.<sup>16</sup> The importing of Japanese food products, ore, aquatic produce, chinaware, and toys for re-export to the rest of Southeast Asia, Europe, and Britain also featured prominently in Singapore's entrepôt economy. Akashi observes that the total value of Japanese exports to Singapore alone at the start of the Second Sino-Japanese War approached 72 million yen (40 million Straits dollars).<sup>17</sup>

Given the proliferation of Japanese products in British Malaya, a general boycott was perceived by many Chinese as a means to damage the Japanese export economy, and hence indirectly undermine Japan's military operations by increasing its war deficit. This was a move that began sporadically across Malaya, as small bands of 'China patriots' took it upon themselves to halt the transportation of Japanese goods or form human barricades outside warehouses and shops that carried products from Japan. Due to the heated racial and political canvas against which these boycotts were set, as well as the fact that early boycotts were often spontaneous and impassioned responses to news of Japanese military victories or atrocities, the public enforcement of sanctions inevitably resulted in violence. One early documented case of boycott-related violence was an act reported in the Malay state of Johor in *The Straits Times* on 6 October 1937. An angry mob, apparently stirred up by news of the fall of Beijing and Tianjin, swarmed a truck suspected of carrying Japanese goods. The hapless driver (whose nationality was not reported, but would not likely have been Japanese) was dragged out of the vehicle before being set upon by the crowd.<sup>18</sup> On the island of Penang, a riot broke out in Georgetown

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<sup>15</sup> H.Y. Kuo, "Recruiting Businesses through Transnationalism: Embedded Chinese Enterprise and Nationalist Activities in Singapore in the 1930s Great Depression", *Enterprise & Society*, Vol. 7 (1), 2006, 113.

<sup>16</sup> Kuo, "Recruiting Businesses through Transnationalism", 110.

<sup>17</sup> Cited in Leong, "Malayan Overseas Chinese and the Sino-Japanese War, 1937-1941", 298.

<sup>18</sup> *The Straits Times*, 7 October 1937.



which lasted for days following the ransacking of a consignment of soya beans that were thought to be from Japan, while in Ipoh a truckload of a similar stock was commandeered and the beans diverted to the People's Park. A less violent boycott, this time of Japanese fish, began in Singapore in November, while in the state of Perak, Chinese trishaws either charged double-fare for Japanese passengers, or refused outright to accept them.<sup>19</sup>

Other Chinese, who were employed by Japanese companies, made a show of staging walkouts. Japan's interests in Malaya's exports hinged heavily on its appetite for ferrous raw materials such as iron, manganese, and bauxite, which were mined by Japanese companies in the Malay states of Johore, Kelantan, and Trengganu. By the 1930s, Malayan mines met nearly 40 per cent of Japan's ferrous metal needs.<sup>20</sup> In his study of Malayan Chinese nationalism, Stephen Leong documents a litany of reported incidents where Chinese labour left their positions in protest of Japan's aggression. On 8 December 1937, eight hundred workers at the state of Johore's Ishihara Sangyo Koshi Mine quit their jobs, along with a further eighty-five labourers at the Ishihara Sangyo Koshi Bauxite Mine. Later that month, hundreds of Chinese coolies left a Japanese mine at Kemaman in the state of Trengganu.<sup>21</sup> They were followed by two thousand workers at Dungun in the same state, the largest Japanese-owned mining operation in Malaya. The Dungun walkout was instigated by a young KMT member, Lim Bo Seng.<sup>22</sup>

### *The Burma Road*

Events at the end of 1938 left the Nationalist armies in dire straits. The fall of Shanghai and Tianjin early on in the conflict and an effective blockade of the key ports along China's eastern seaboard left Xiamen and Guangzhou as the two most important remaining ports in Chinese hands that remained open for international trade. But by November that year, both cities fell to advancing Japanese troops, cutting off China's Nationalist troops from much-needed supplies and armaments from overseas. Thousands of tons of arms, for example, became stranded in warehouses in

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<sup>19</sup> Leong, "Malayan Overseas Chinese and the Sino-Japanese War, 1937–1941", 297–298.

<sup>20</sup> C. Bayly and T. Harper, *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941–1945* (Allen Lane: London, 2004), 7.

<sup>21</sup> Leong, "Malayan Overseas Chinese and the Sino-Japanese War, 1937–1941", 298–299.

<sup>22</sup> Bayly and Harper, *Forgotten Armies*, 23.



Hong Kong when Guangzhou fell, too heavy to be transported in meaningful numbers by junks that were brave enough to run the gauntlet of cruisers and destroyers blockading smaller Nationalist ports such as Fuzhou and Shantou.

The scenario of the seaboard being in Japanese hands was one that was forecast by the KMT government from the war's outset. Shortly after the commencement of hostilities, Chiang's administration began laying plans to construct road and rail lines from key cities within the Chinese interior to the outside world. In December 1937, work began on a two thousand mile roadway linking Alma-Ata in Soviet Russia to Lanzhou and Urumqi in the western provinces of Gansu and Xinjiang respectively. But the poor infrastructure that connected these cities to other Chinese urban centres closer to the frontline, as well as the difficulty of keeping a constant line of trucks moving across vast distances and desolate terrain, meant that as an artery for military supplies the road was of limited value. Nevertheless, this passage, which came to be known as the Turkestan Road, provided an annual tonnage capacity of eighteen thousand tons from 1937, when it opened, to 1941, when the flow of material dried up after the signing of the Soviet-Japanese Neutrality Pact, and when Soviet priorities switched to defending against invading German armies that summer. In that time, the Soviet Union delivered close to fifty thousand tons of weapons and ammunition, as well as seven hundred aircraft.<sup>23</sup> In the skies above the Turkestan Road, Soviet pilots flew from airbases in modern-day Kazakhstan along the seventh century silk route into the cities of Lanzhou and Xian. With no weather or navigational tools to assist pilots, it was normal for each flight to lose around half of its aircraft when aircraft ran out of fuel or flew into mountains amid bad weather.<sup>24</sup>

At around the time of the Marco Polo Bridge incident, Nationalist planners also began to consider the construction of a rail link from the city of Lashio, in British Burma, to Kunming, the capital of the Yunnan province. It was not the first time that such an idea had been proposed. In 1884, Holt Hallett, an engineer with the Civil Works Department in India, and Archibald Colquhoun, a colonial official in the Burmese administration, were granted £3,500 by the British Chambers of Commerce to investigate the possibility of constructing a rail line from Mandalay to Kunming.

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<sup>23</sup> O.C. Spencer, *Flying the Hump: Memories of an Air War* (Texas A&M University Press: Texas, 1992), 20.

<sup>24</sup> Spencer, *Flying the Hump*, 20.

The careful survey that was conducted demonstrated that the mountainous terrain, the dense vegetation, and the vast spans were not insurmountable obstacles. But word about the study and the hypothetical linkway was met by disinterest from the Qing government as well as by British merchants in Burma, who were unsure of just how economically beneficial such a railway would be to British interests.<sup>25</sup> This meant that once hostilities began in 1937, no matter how urgent it was a railway could not have been completed in time to serve China's needs due to the array of engineering complications that needed to be studied and then addressed.

A motor road, though, was feasible given the labour resources available to the Nationalist government. And the benefits of such a link were plentiful. Lashio was connected by rail to the port of Rangoon, and Japanese forces did not dare interfere with operations on the Burma side due to British neutrality. The distance between Lashio and Kunming was only six hundred and fifty miles, which was relatively short compared to the thousand miles of roadway that lay between Alma-Ata and Urumqi. The shorter distance also meant that it required a smaller number of vehicles to transport the same tonnage of supplies compared to the Alma-Ata-Urumqi route, since motor vehicles could complete a round trip in two weeks on a Lashio-Kunming road, compared to nearly a month on the former. This savings in motorised transport was critical. There was a shortage of trucks among Nationalist formations, and much of the Chinese army and its logistical arms relied on horse-drawn carriages and other pack animals. It was a weakness that the KMT was trying to rectify even as discussions about a direct link between Lashio and Kunming were still underway. In December 1937, Chiang's government authorised the South-west Transportation Company to use part of a US\$ 25 million loan from the United States to procure a thousand trucks manufactured by Chrysler and General Motors, with an order for another one thousand placed in May the following year.<sup>26</sup> Almost all were sent by ship to Rangoon, and then driven up to Lashio to await use.

The Burma Road, as the link came to be known, involved the connecting of two sets of roads that already existed at the start of the Second Sino-Japanese War. The first was the road from Lashio to Wanding, a town on

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<sup>25</sup> Courtesy of the report by Chief Secretary to the Government of Burma Sir Henry Craw to the Royal Geographical Society, and published in H. Craw, "The Burma Road", *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 99 (5/6), 1942, 238.

<sup>26</sup> Courtesy of the report by Walter Mallory delivered to the House of Commons, and published in W.H. Mallory, "The Burma Road", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 17 (3), 1939, 627.

the Burmese side of the border. The second was a road between Xiaguan and Kunming. What remained was the construction of three hundred miles of new road that would connect Xiaguan with Wanding. This was an engineering project that would have been exigent even with the right equipment and carried out in peacetime. The height of the terrain varied dramatically—for instance, the China-bound road from Longling reached a peak of seven thousand feet above sea level before dropping within a distance of twenty-five miles to just under three thousand feet at the Salween river crossing, and then climbing again over thirty miles to five thousand feet at the city of Baoshan. Two suspension bridges also needed to be constructed to span the vast four thousand foot gorges carved out of the mountains by the Salween and Mekong rivers. The monsoon from May to November brought an annual rainfall of around ninety inches, washing out culverts and causing landslides. And all of the work needed to be done with no more than hand tools for excavation and clearing, and under the constant threat of attack by Japanese aircraft.

Assembling the labour required for this herculean task required Chinese engineers and planners to shy away from the easiest line between Lashio and Kunming for the road. Had the road been shifted approximately seventy-five miles to the south from where it was eventually constructed (bypassing Wanding, Longshan, and Baoshan, and instead connecting via a Zhenkang-Dali-Kunming route), the engineering difficulties would not have been as substantial.<sup>27</sup> But the northern passage cut across the most populous parts of Yunnan, including two small cities and three townships, whereas the landscape of the southern path was dominated primarily by barren valleys. Local labour, therefore, was far easier to contract along the former, which sealed the Chinese government's decision in confirming the route.

Work on the Burma Road commenced in the final months of 1937. Over a hundred thousand labourers were employed to connect the Lashio-Wanding and Xiaguan-Kunming motorways, as well as widen the existing Kunming-Chongqing roads. Native Yunnan tribes like the Pai-i, the Nosu, and the Shan made up a large proportion of the labour force.<sup>28</sup> In some cases, men and women were conscripted in the name of the war effort, while in parts of Yunnan the local population saw the opportunity

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<sup>27</sup> Craw, "The Burma Road", 240.

<sup>28</sup> See H.C. Hu, "Frontier Tribes of Southwest China", *Far Eastern Survey*, Vol. II (10), 1942, 116–120.

provided by coolie work as an ideal entry-point into the money economy, which until the Second World War was still largely absent from the border regions of the province.

On occasion, overseas Chinese labourers were also employed to build and then maintain the Burma Road. Koh Pei Shen, born in Penang in 1920, was working as a dock coolie in Singapore when he heard about the outbreak of war. Despite the fact that he had never visited China or received a formal education, he had grown up on stories of what his home village and its surrounds were like. They were told to him by his mother, who had migrated from Shantou shortly after the Xinhai Revolution. As a conduit of imagination and deeply-personalised nationalism, Koh's mother populated the blank canvas of his knowledge of China with kin he had never met before—cousins, uncles and aunts, granduncles and grandaunts—as well as folktales of China and explanations of traditions and beliefs unique to their dialect group, the Teochew. All of this formed the basis of a compelling relationship between Koh, China, and the Chinese nation while he grew up.<sup>29</sup>

By the end of 1937, word about the construction of the road had spread among labourers in Singapore. Although the official call for volunteers would not come for another year, coolies like Koh worked for *towkay* (Chinese merchant bosses) with connections to the labour industry back in China. The Nationalist government's recruitment of large numbers of labourers for the Burma Road had inadvertently resulted in labour shortages for ventures elsewhere, or at the very least drove the cost of labour up. So it is perhaps not surprising that Nanyang coolie contractors soon received unofficial word of the government's project. Some, like Koh's *towkay*, considered themselves to be patriots and were prepared to lend coolies the money to travel to Yunnan if their labourers wanted to offer their strength to the construction of the road. A few decided that remaining in Singapore was too frustrating given that a war between the homeland and Japan was now underway, or felt the excitement of a great war adventure too strong to resist, or indeed both:

Some of us decided to ask the *towkay* for a loan... It was equal to about two months wages for us to get a boat ticket to Vietnam, and then a train to Yunnan. We also needed to purchase our own equipment, because we were not sure if we would be given tools when we arrived... I also took out an extra four months worth of wage in loan to send to my mother [in Penang],

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<sup>29</sup> Author's interview with Koh Pei Shen, translated from Mandarin, 11/2/2007.

because I was worried . . . who knew how long it would be before we could remit money from Yunnan? I knew nothing about it so I thought it was best to be safe . . . The *towkay* was good because he did not charge interest on our loans. He even threw us a banquet and wished us farewell at the harbour.<sup>30</sup>

Along with six other friends, Koh made the journey by ship and train through Vietnam and then the Chinese south, arriving in Kunming in February 1938. When they arrived, they found that opportunities to work on the Burma Road were plentiful. Labour contractors scoured the streets looking for fit men and women alike. With no effort at all, the small band soon found themselves working on a stretch of road outside of Longshan.

From the start of the road's construction, British and, in particular, Chinese engineers were challenged by road alignment issues and the transportation of raw materials (gravel, steel cables, and wood) for the road and various crossings.<sup>31</sup> Most of the issues were ironed out as 1938 progressed, and by January 1939 the Burma Road was open to traffic. Long stretches of the road were, however, little more than beaten clay and sand, which meant that during the wet season parts of the Burma Road was rendered impassable for days when ruts developed on its surface. Other parts of the road were made up of just blocks of stone, hand-laid and then covered with sand and gravel—the metalling of the entire road was planned but never completed due to the invasion of Burma in 1942—and the unevenness of the stones quickly resulted in protruding points across long stretches, often with each protrusion several inches in diameter and capable of tearing holes in tyres and wrecking wheel axes.<sup>32</sup> Much of the road was also narrow to the point where only one lane of traffic could pass safely. The solution for Chinese planners was to construct a series of interval stations staffed by Nationalist army signallers acting as traffic controllers so that motor vehicles could be instructed to wait until all oncoming traffic passed through the single-lane stretch.

Completing the Lashio-Kunming link was a considerable feat of engineering, but finding the drivers to drive the thousands of trucks being purchased by the KMT, as well as the mechanics to service those trucks, presented considerable difficulties. The task of organising freighters and labour to populate the Burma Road fell once again to the South-west Transportation Company. Its operatives set about contracting a handful

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<sup>30</sup> Author's interview with Koh Pei Shen, translated from Mandarin., 11/2/2007.

<sup>31</sup> Craw, "The Burma Road", 241.

<sup>32</sup> Craw, "The Burma Road", 239; and author's interview with Koh Pei Shen, translated from Mandarin., 11/2/2007.

of companies to provide approximately one hundred trucks to ply the one hundred and twenty mile route on the Burmese side of the road up to the Chinese border town of Chefang, where the goods would be reloaded onto lorries belonging to the vast and growing Nationalist army motor pool for the rest of the five hundred mile journey to Kunming.

While unskilled labour was easy enough to secure in substantial numbers by drawing from the local tribes of southwest Yunnan, trained drivers and mechanics were nowhere as readily available. The province was one of the most isolated and underdeveloped parts of the country. Mule and oxen were used on dirt tracks when necessary. Trucks and other motor vehicles had little place or purpose in southwest Yunnan until the road was built. Anyone who could drive a large vehicle (or even a small one), or had some familiarity with the working parts of a motorcar was sought out by the KMT. Skilled personnel in existing Nationalist army units were transferred to the Chinese southwest when it was feasible to do so, although there was a limit to how much strip-mining of qualified drivers and mechanics could be done without undermining a motorised formation's ability to function. Recruiters scoured regional urban centres, where driving was a more common part of life. Yet even then, there was a shortfall. Inevitably, the KMT approached the FCRFSS for assistance. It is easy to understand why. There were an estimated fifty to sixty thousand trained drivers and mechanics residing throughout the Nanyang region.<sup>33</sup>

### *The Nanyang Volunteers*

In February 1939, shortly after the traffic began on the Burma Road, H.H. Kung dispatched a telegram to the executive committee of the FCRFSS with a new imperative. Relief funds were not enough. Now there was an equally urgent demand for drivers to transport war material and mechanics to repair and maintain the vehicles. Any skilled patriot, the telegram concluded, should be urged to volunteer to be sent to Kunming. To stress the importance of this recruitment drive, the director of the South-west Transportation Company was dispatched to meet with the Federation's executive to brief them on the severity of the lack of drivers and mechanics.<sup>34</sup> The 1940 annual report of the FCRFSS highlighted the instructions from the Nationalist government. Volunteers needed to

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<sup>33</sup> *Nanyang Siang Pau*, 27 March 1939.

<sup>34</sup> Leong, "Malayan Overseas Chinese and the Sino-Japanese War, 1937–1941", 301.

have experience in driving or servicing motor vehicles, basic literacy in Chinese, be of good physical health, and aged between 20 and 40. The financial cost of transporting individuals from their places of residence to Kunming was to be met by local relief fund associations dipping into war contributions raised, and those selected for service could expect a base salary of C\$30.<sup>35</sup> The response from the Federation and the Nanyang Chinese communities was immediate. On 7 February, the FCRFSS issued their first recruitment notice in Chinese language newspapers throughout the region.<sup>36</sup> Branch associations across the region sent out bulletins to clan associations, trade unions, chambers of commerce, and labour organisations. Thousands responded from across the region, and the popular term 'Nanyang Volunteers' was quickly coined in contemporary newspapers to describe the movement.

The fall of the Nanyang colonies to Japanese troops in 1941 and 1942 resulted in the loss of much archival evidence that would enable historians to map the exact number of volunteers, their places of origin, and their names. Fearing retribution by occupying Japanese forces for contributing to the war effort in China, many associations buried or destroyed documents that were produced upon the registration of a new driver or mechanic. Some documents did survive, however, to furnish us with a sense of how the volunteer movement was administered, and coverage in Chinese newspapers such as the *Nanyang Siang Pau* and *Sin Chew Jit Poh* on volunteers destined for the Burma Road was a regular feature between February 1939 and June 1940, suggesting that the flow of drivers was fairly steady. The celebratory tone in this coverage was also clear. Such was the case in one article, which used the term '*youxia*' (knight-errant) to describe a batch of volunteers leaving Singapore, and hence drew on comparisons with the finest heroic tropes in traditional Chinese literature.<sup>37</sup>

Overseas Chinese drivers and mechanics were sent to Singapore, which became a staging area before departure to the Burma Road. There they received food and lodging while an interview and skills test were administered. Volunteers needed to be vouched for by a guarantor, and present their driver's license or certificates of training. Mechanics were asked to demonstrate their knowledge by identifying vehicle components and putting an engine component back together from dismantled parts. Drivers

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<sup>35</sup> Cited in Leong, "Malayan Overseas Chinese and the Sino-Japanese War, 1937–1941", 301.

<sup>36</sup> *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, 8 February 1939.

<sup>37</sup> *Nanyang Siang Pau*, 18 May 1939.



were tested to verify their ability to operate trucks along Outram Road and Neo Tiew Road. The latter was especially popular as an exam venue as it was unsealed, and included several sharp bends on inclines. These were conditions that were judged to be comparable to what the drivers would face in Yunnan.

Once a cohort was deemed ready to leave, the group left Singapore for Kunming along one of two passages. One set of groups departed by ship, bound for Haiphong in French Indochina. There they would be placed on a passenger train that took the volunteers to Yunnan province. The remaining parties took the overland passage, travelling by rail from Singapore up the Malay Peninsula to Rangoon, and eventually to Lashio. There they would board trucks bound for Kunming. The majority of drivers and mechanics were sent along the former route. In 1939, nine groups totalling 2,651 volunteers proceeded along the Singapore-Indochina-Yunnan route between February and August, while a further six groups (five hundred and twenty-nine volunteers in all) left by the overland passage over approximately the same period. The size of each batch that left Singapore was never consistent. Some were several hundred strong, as was the case with the fifth group to travel by sea, which departed on 23 May and consisted of five hundred and thirty volunteers. Other groups consisted of a handful of men, as was the case with one band that left on the overland route on 22 September with just three members.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, with much of the archival record fragmentary or lost forever, the exact Malayan contribution to these groups is hard to determine. Stephen Leong, citing the *Ma-lai-ya hua-chi'iao-chih* and augmenting to that his own oral history interviews with surviving drivers, points out the commonly accepted estimate of around a thousand drivers, including "100 from Taiping, 203 from Ipoh, 80 from Johore, 73 from Luala Lumpur, [and] 450 from Singapore."<sup>39</sup>

The numbers cited by Leong do not capture the breadth of support that the Burma Road initiative enjoyed from Malaya's China diaspora. Nanyang volunteers slept and dined for free at the luxurious Chinese-owned Great Southern Hotel. They were invited to attend concerts and musical performances as guests-of-honour, and were provided free haircuts by salons. Couplets and songs were composed about them. Families of volunteers were given pennants and other tokens of appreciation, while some

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<sup>38</sup> Cited in Leong, "Malayan Overseas Chinese and the Sino-Japanese War, 1937–1941", 302.

<sup>39</sup> Leong, "Malayan Overseas Chinese and the Sino-Japanese War, 1937–1941", 301.



received pensions from the relief fund. At its abbot's initiative, Shuang Lin Monastery was transformed into a training centre for drivers bound for the Burma Road. An empty plot of land behind the temple became used for basic driving instruction, while more advanced courses were devised along the roads surrounding Shuang Lin.<sup>40</sup> With so many resources mobilised to provide the KMT government with the skilled labour it needed, it was clear that the Nanyang Volunteers were representatives of the China diaspora at war.

Ng Gan Cheng travelled with a sizeable group that left Singapore in the latter half of 1939 through the Indochina route. Born in Singapore to Hokkien migrants in 1922 as the oldest of five children, Ng grew up in a village near Buangkok, in the rural north of Singapore island. He attended a vernacular primary school established by a Chinese philanthropist who owned rubber plantations in the area, but dropped out to work as a dockyard coolie. By the time he was in his teens, stories of the injustices inflicted on China by Japan were already familiar. One of the most common ones he remembered hearing was how the Japanese government was behind the operation of tens of thousands of opium dens across China, hoping to weaken the country by addicting as many Chinese as possible to the drug. Other stories about Japanese military atrocities committed against the innocent, the old, the young, and the infirmed and increasingly graphic in detail when war finally broke out, led to angry discussions among the coolies during breaks on the docks about what they could do.

Just how true or clichéd these stories were did not matter to Ng, even in retrospect. The atmosphere that he was immersed in was a heady mixture of patriotic anger and youthful adventurism. After working themselves into a state through their frustration at the distance of the conflict and their inability to take part in it, Ng and his friends would conduct spontaneous boycotts when they decided to act against shops that they felt were guilty of selling Japanese goods. On more than one occasion, the coolies would cease work and march towards a provision shop that stocked food products from Japan. The hapless shopkeeper or assistant would face demands from the mob to place the offending items in front of the shop, after which the group would then make a public show of destroying the

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<sup>40</sup> Chan, *Light on the Lotus Hill*, 49–50; Author's interview with Ng Gan Cheng, translated from Mandarin, 28/1/2009; Author's interview with Tan Kim Soon, translated from Mandarin, 28/1/2009.

goods while shouting patriotic slogans. Decades later, a much older Ng was philosophical in his reflections on what drove him to such actions:

I believe we were frustrated at many things—our work was difficult and tiring, you can't imagine how tiring. So this (overseas Chinese nationalism) was something that took our minds away from it... But you must understand that no matter what we needed, at the time we truly hated the Japanese. My friends and I, when we talked about them we didn't call them Japanese. We called them monkeys and vermin instead, because they weren't human. Humans couldn't do what they did to Chinese... and destroying things that were related to Japan made us feel like we were doing something.<sup>41</sup>

When the call from the FCRFSS for volunteers came through, there was no doubt in Ng's mind that he wanted to sign up. But he was neither a driver, nor was he old enough. The latter was easy enough to address, as he felt confident in his ability to lie about his age. Years of work under the sun and the whisker of a moustache that he was trying to grow made him look older than his seventeen years. His lack of driving or mechanical ability, however, was not something he could lie about easily. As luck would have it, Ng heard through a friend that the owner of a small freight company was running informal driving classes for patriotic Chinese who wanted to volunteer but needed to learn how to drive. Along with a friend, Tay Ji Siong, Ng took up the offer. Within months, he had learned enough about driving motor vehicles to be confident enough to volunteer to a branch association. The gambit worked, and by around July 1939 Ng and three friends, including Tay, were booked along with "a few hundred others" to travel by ship to Indochina. He recalled the general mood of the band:

During the voyage, we weren't nervous. It was like an adventure... because we were going to help our country, and because so many of us had never been to China before. Even though we lived all our lives in the Nanyang region, China was in our blood. It was like we were going home at the same time, so that's what I meant when it felt like an adventure. Some people even brought along addresses of relatives they never met before, so they could look them up after the war was over... You might think it was foolhardy. We definitely knew it was dangerous, but most of us were young men and so we were quite positive about getting through the war alive.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Author's interview with Ng Gan Cheng, translated from Mandarin, 28/1/2009.

<sup>42</sup> Author's interview with Ng Gan Cheng, translated from Mandarin, 28/1/2009.

When he began driving, Ng quickly realised that his months of driving practice in Singapore came nowhere near to furnishing him with the skill and experience he needed to be ready for the considerable challenges of the Burma Road. The unsealed road was disconcerting to drive on, while fatigue caused drivers to misjudge. Trucks plummeted over the side of mountains. There was little that could be done for the hapless driver and his passenger mechanic, and the convoys just kept moving on. Landslides, especially during the monsoon season, killed even careful drivers with a suddenness that left little time for response. In an interview, Ng remembered the hazardous conditions of driving on the Lashio-Kunming motorway:

The trucks were hard to drive, because the roads were so narrow and bumpy. *Clog-clog, clog-clog, clog-clog*, up and down you went as you drove. Your body was jumping out of its seat. But the bumps were okay; if you hit a pothole and the tyres got stuck, you were in trouble . . . if there was a landslide just when you were passing you would surely not live. My friend's truck fell over the side because a big landslide hit him on the side, just two trucks ahead of me. It happened so quickly I didn't even know what was happening until I couldn't see his vehicle.<sup>43</sup>

After his initial year in Kunming, Ng was introduced to a new threat. The fall of France in June 1940 had eventually led to the Japanese occupation of French Indochina. From their bases there, Japanese bombers could now easily reach Kunming and the Chinese side of the Burma Road. And it was clear that they knew of the city's importance as a marshalling point for trucks, labour, and supplies.

Four to five times a week, scores of bombers would attack Kunming with the aim of causing as much infrastructural damage as possible. Yet their success was limited by an efficient system of early-warning signals that the Chinese Nationalist army had put in place. Once Japanese aircraft crossed the Indochinese border, they were spotted by signallers in watchtowers built along the Chinese southern frontier. Depending on the direction of the bomber force, the signallers would phone the information in to the relevant air defence coordinator, who would raise the air raid sirens. In Kunming, this warning network provided ample time to get away from the most hazardous parts of the city—the train and road depots, as well as the warehouse quarter—and into the surrounding hills and forests:

When the Japanese bombers came to attack Kunming, we learned to pay attention to the air-raid sirens . . . There were no bomb shelters for anyone,

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<sup>43</sup> Author's interview with Ng Gan Cheng, translated from Mandarin, 28/1/2009.

but Kunming has lots of hills surrounding it. When we heard the alert, it was our responsibility to take a truck and drive it outside the city, in the woods of the hills . . . Usually we had nearly an hour to react, so there was time to even collect civilians in our trucks and take them with us. It became like a routine, so it wasn't scary for me.<sup>44</sup>

Like Ng, Tan Kim Soon was also born in Singapore to first generation Hokkien migrants, and the third in a family of six children. His father, Tan Ah Foo, ran a moderately successful food hawker stall on Prinsep Street. As a child, Kim Soon had helped out with the business, collecting bowls and plates and rinsing them in buckets of canal water. He had heard about Japanese designs on Manchuria and China from customers who spoke about these worldly affairs among themselves, and more than once he demanded that the customers educate him on what was happening on the Chinese mainland.

By the time he was fifteen, the younger Tan had grown tired of helping out in the family business. Through a contact in the Hokkien Clan Association, he was introduced to a building mogul, Tan Chin Swee, who proceeded to have him trained as a truck driver. After his training, Kim Soon was put to work delivering wooden beams to construction sites. "There was a lot of building going on then," Kim Soon recalled, "and you need two things to be a good truck driver—the ability to judge distance accurately, and hand-eye coordination. I was very good with both."<sup>45</sup>

Tan's exposure to overseas Chinese nationalism and the opportunity to channel it into action was a typical experience. By 1939, the 21 year-old Kim Soon became aware that the feeling of Chinese patriotism was engulfing much of the population. Demonstrations against Japan's military aggression in China were becoming commonplace. At one such rally, Tan noticed young students handing out some sheets of paper. "I wasn't very literate, so I asked one fellow next to me, wearing glasses and reading a sheet, to translate. He told me it was a recruitment pamphlet. They needed mechanics, drivers, nurses, and labourers."<sup>46</sup>

After mulling over the idea of volunteering for weeks—"I thought I should do something, but I didn't feel that strongly about it at the time"—Tan decided that his skills could be put to more meaningful use in China's war against Japan. Approaching the Hokkien Clan Association again, he asked if arrangements could be made to send him to China. His request

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<sup>44</sup> Author's interview with Ng Gan Cheng, translated from Mandarin, 28/1/2009.

<sup>45</sup> Author's interview with Tan Kim Soon, translated from Mandarin, 28/1/2009.

<sup>46</sup> Author's interview with Tan Kim Soon, translated from Mandarin, 28/1/2009.

was duly obliged and, after being subjected to physical fitness and driving tests, he was placed on a train bound for Rangoon with around twenty other like-minded individuals. On the journey, he got to know some of the other volunteers better:

Most of the group were like me, they had a small skill to offer, or just their strength. They were labourers. I knew one fellow because we once worked the same construction site... There was also a doctor, and a clerk... All from Singapore.<sup>47</sup>

When the group arrived at Rangoon, they duly followed the instructions given by the clan association in Singapore, and made their way to the Chinese consulate in the city. They were then transported by another train, then a truck, to Kunming. There, he found himself living in makeshift quarters at a military motor pool outside the city, sharing accommodation with drivers, mechanics, and labourers from Singapore, Malaya, Thailand, Hong Kong, the Philippines, and even Australia.

Tan found himself in the thick of things soon enough. Just three days after arriving, he was asked to be part of a convoy of some thirty trucks bound for Chefang. It was to be the first of several grain runs to stock up supplies before the monsoon season. He remembered praying with some other drivers for a safe journey. "We were told by the experienced ones to pray for rain and thick low clouds. That made it more difficult for Japanese aircraft to attack."<sup>48</sup> The convoy set off to the blare of horns from parked trucks, a way of wishing the convoy safe passage.

Without a map or an orienteering session, his first trip was a harrowing experience. "I didn't know... how to read maps... we just followed."<sup>49</sup> The prayers for rain and hopes for safe passage were in vain on that trip. The sun blazed down and the humidity, exacerbated by fumes, was nearly unbearable. Then, just over an hour after the convoy left Kunming, Japanese aircraft swept down from above:

The first vehicle suddenly exploded! There was a big blast and you could feel it, like it was punching you... the glass of my truck shattered, and I couldn't see anything. I hit the brakes and jumped out, and ran into the jungle... I could hear more explosions. You couldn't tell which were the bombs, and which were the trucks blowing up... People were calling for help, it was so

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<sup>47</sup> Author's interview with Tan Kim Soon, translated from Mandarin, 28/1/2009.

<sup>48</sup> Author's interview with Tan Kim Soon, translated from Mandarin, 28/1/2009.

<sup>49</sup> Author's interview with Tan Kim Soon, translated from Mandarin, 28/1/2009.

pitiful... I didn't dare move, because I thought if I moved I would die for sure. So I waited in that spot for hours.<sup>50</sup>

Tan was eventually rescued by a recovery party, and despite his inauspicious start, he would survive the next two and a half years driving trucks on the Burma Road, shuttling between Chefang and Kunming. After the link was overrun by Japanese armies in 1942, he was transferred to a Nationalist division in Hunan province. The defeat of Chinese forces there and the destruction of the unit he was attached to in 1944 left him wandering aimlessly across the Chinese countryside, living on what he could scrounge as well as the generosity of villagers until he was eventually picked up by Nationalist forces again early in 1945.

The act of volunteering often came with support from the wider China diaspora. But older traditions meant that family members often attempted to persuade the Nanyang Volunteers to put their families first. Sometimes the reasons were economic in nature. Witness the story of Wang Jing Zhen, a newly married volunteer mechanic highlighted in the *Nanyang Siang Pau*. Whilst on the payroll of the Nationalist army, he earned the monthly equivalent of 9 Straits Dollars. In contrast, he could earn between 80–200 Straits Dollars per month working for private companies in Malaya.<sup>51</sup> Service on the Burma Road thus entailed a large drop in wage on top of being exposed to the hazards of war. This measure of sacrifice demanded a great deal of understanding on the part of one's immediately family, and gives some perspective on the strength of the diaspora's affiliation. Xie Zhang Nong, who arrived in Singapore from Hainan Island to join members of his extended family when he was 14 years old, found that to be the case when he informed his aunt about his decision to leave for the Burma Road. It was an emotional meeting, with his aunt reminding Xie of his duty to the family line as the only male in the family. His riposte was dramatic as he argued that there "would be... no home to return to" if the Chinese overseas were not prepared to make sacrifices for the homeland.<sup>52</sup> In the end, Xie's aunt relented and gave her support to his decision. Xie left Singapore on 14 August, bound for Yunnan via Haiphong.

Some overseas Chinese in Malaya who did not have the desired skills or the opportunity to volunteer to serve on the Burma Road were just

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<sup>50</sup> Author's interview with Tan Kim Soon, translated from Mandarin, 28/1/2009.

<sup>51</sup> *Nanyang Siang Pau*, 11 July 1939 and 17 July 1939.

<sup>52</sup> Chan, *Light on the Lotus Hill*, 55–56.

eager to make their way to China to take part in the conflict. Chia Soon Guan was born in Singapore in 1924. He had just started middle school when war broke out, and hence when the FCRFSS issued a call for drivers and mechanics in 1939, he had to pass as he was too young to be accepted by any of the associations. Nor was he able to drive or serve as a mechanic anyway. Chia was, nevertheless, determined to do something “other than sell flowers and singing songs”, and so he pressed his father for a loan to cover his travel fare to the wartime capital, Chongqing. The family patriarch, who had emigrated from Shantou as a young boy with his parents, felt strongly enough about China that he agreed to lend his son some money for the trip. In retrospect, Chia recalled, it was a huge concession. Not because his father struggled to afford it, but because it meant potentially sacrificing his oldest son for a war that had no direct impact on their current lives:

When I think back today, I find myself surprised that he was willing to send me to China. He knew why I was going there. That is, to fight, or at least to do something to help win the war . . . He had hoped that I would learn to run the shop. It had been good to our family because we lived more comfortably than many people in Singapore at the time . . . But I think he was just as proud of being Chinese as I was. Those days, we read about how cruel the Japanese were all the time in places like Shanghai. English newspapers, Chinese newspapers, they all reported it. How could we stand by with our arms crossed and watch our own people suffer?<sup>53</sup>

In July 1941, Chia secured a passage by boat to Rangoon, before making his way up to the Burma Road. Eventually, he arrived in the wartime capital of Chongqing in September. On only his second day in the city, he was introduced to the horrors of war:

I was walking down one of the streets to a market where I was told I could buy some food. I saw bodies lying under the rubble of buildings—here there was a hand, there a leg, usually charred black and red. Hands were curled up like claws, and there was a terrible smell. I don’t know how long the bodies were left there, but people were walking past and no one seemed to care. I told myself not to, as well, but it was shocking . . . Then, just as I got to the end of the street, the air raid siren went off. I never heard one before, so I didn’t know what to do! People seemed to be running in the same direction, and so I just followed them . . . They went into a cave, carved out of rock . . . There were about a hundred of us inside . . . After awhile, we heard

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<sup>53</sup> Author’s interview with Chia Soon Guan, translated from Mandarin, 18/7/2010.



engines droning overhead. Just a soft sound. Then the bombs exploding outside, on the surface.<sup>54</sup>

Chia would not have known it then, but he had arrived in the maelstrom of the Sino-Japanese War. Determined to break the morale of the civilian population in the capital, the Japanese air force conducted a sustained bombing campaign that would come to span the better part of the war. For weeks on end, flights of medium bombers appeared overhead wantonly dropping incendiary munitions alongside high explosive bombs on the city. At the time, there were no available fighter aircraft to provide protection to the city, nor were there anti-aircraft guns to dissuade attackers. Chongqing would have been a death-trap for its wartime population of 12 million were it not for the city's effective air-raid warning system and shelters, which were cut into the granite that the capital was built on. Many still died from the infernos started by incendiaries, but far fewer than those who would have perished without the city's protective infrastructure.

Having experienced the ferocity of Japanese air raids, Chia was more determined than ever to find a way to contribute to the war effort in Chongqing. For a time, he volunteered as a stretcher-bearer, and rode around the city on makeshift ambulances that ranged from trucks to horse-drawn carts to modified trishaws. But in February 1942, he was able to enlist as a gunner in one of the city's newly formed anti-aircraft artillery units, the 368th Auxiliary Battalion. After just a week of training, Chongqing's American-made flak defences were put to the test:

The Japanese bombers came overhead, all lined up in formation . . . They were quite low, and moving slowly. I said to Chen (the second gunner) and Mao (the loader) that the Japanese were being arrogant. The commander gave the order, and we started firing . . . There were these puffs of black clouds that appeared, I didn't see if they hit. I was too excited and busy working the gun the right way to watch. But just the sound of the gun firing and knowing that we were able to fight back gave us a sense of exuberance . . . [Later] Mao told us he saw some planes being shot down. That made us feel even better, the thought of arrogant Japanese pilots screaming as their planes were hit. No matter who shot them down, the Japanese learned that Chongqing, like China, was not going to just give up without fighting.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Author's interview with Chia Soon Guan, translated from Mandarin, 18/7/2010.

<sup>55</sup> Author's interview with Chia Soon Guan, translated from Mandarin, 18/7/2010.



While the Burma Road remained open, American and British observers were noting that approximately two hundred and fifty trucks crossed the border from the British colony into China each day, carrying close to twenty thousand tons of goods and supplies every month. The inefficient and often corrupt running of the supply trains meant that the majority of the tonnage never got to where they were needed, as much as three quarters of each convoy load, one contemporary report suggested.<sup>56</sup> Sometimes the load of a truck needed to be abandoned when the vehicle suffered irreparable damage. On other occasions Japanese aircraft would exact their toll in strafing or bombing attacks. Much more never arrived in Kunming when drivers who were tired or frightened decided to dump their consignments in depots sited along the Burma Road by Chinese planners. Originally, these depots were meant to store first aid supplies for injuries sustained by transportation crew.<sup>57</sup> They were also designed to stow the parts needed to make on-the-spot repairs to motor vehicles that had broken-down due to damage or mechanical failure. Increasingly, however, some drivers decided that when the journey between Lashio and Kunming was too hazardous then leaving the cargo at a roadside depot would be sufficient. Surely, some reasoned, they would be picked up by other trucks passing through.<sup>58</sup> Unfortunately, most were left where they were dumped, until locals scavenged them for sale in the black market, or until perishables wasted away. Other drivers used the depots as trading posts, where opportunistic merchants or officers would pay a driver to leave the supplies behind, to be sold at a profit in a region where wartime commodities were fetching handsome returns.

Wastefulness and dishonesty aside, the Burma Road was historically important within the frame of the diaspora's war against Japan because it gave the Malayan Chinese—both skilled and unskilled labour—a transnational point to converge on, and for their ideological affiliation with China to manifest itself in an obvious manner. Pressed for labour and material, the Chinese government issued a call for assistance specifically to China's diaspora. Thousands responded, despite never having set foot on Chinese soil in many instances. Many paid the ultimate price for their earnestly imagined connection with a political centre that they identified with above all others. For historians, the flow of thousands to the Burma

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<sup>56</sup> Craw, "The Burma Road", 241–242.

<sup>57</sup> W.H. Mallory, "The Burma Road", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 17 (3), 1939, 627.

<sup>58</sup> Author's interview with Tan Kim Soon, translated from Mandarin, 28/1/2009.

Road provides us with critical insight into the historical reality of life in Malaya's China diaspora. For them, the Second World War began with the Marco Polo Bridge Incident 1937. They made sense of the world from that moment on through the lens of war, and as historical actors and agents in their own right, sought out ways to bring themselves into the conflict.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour and the invasion of Malaya in December 1941 spelled the beginning of the end of the Burma Road. That month, Japanese forces crossed the Thai border into Burma. By June the following year, the road had been overrun as Allied troops failed to stave off the offensive. Once again, Nationalist China looked like it was about to be asphyxiated from the supplies its allies and sympathisers were sending through. But the entry of other nations, especially the United States, into the war would transform the nature of the conflict, and herald an initiative for other overseas Chinese to take part in.



Figure 1 Pilots and crew from RAF No. 225 Squadron in North Africa. Tan Kay Hai is third from the left. Image courtesy of Li-Er Hanson, reproduced with permission.



Figure 2 Pilots from RAF No. 225 Squadron in Italy, c.1943. Tan Kay Hai is first from left in the front row. Image courtesy of Li-Er Hanson, reproduced with permission.

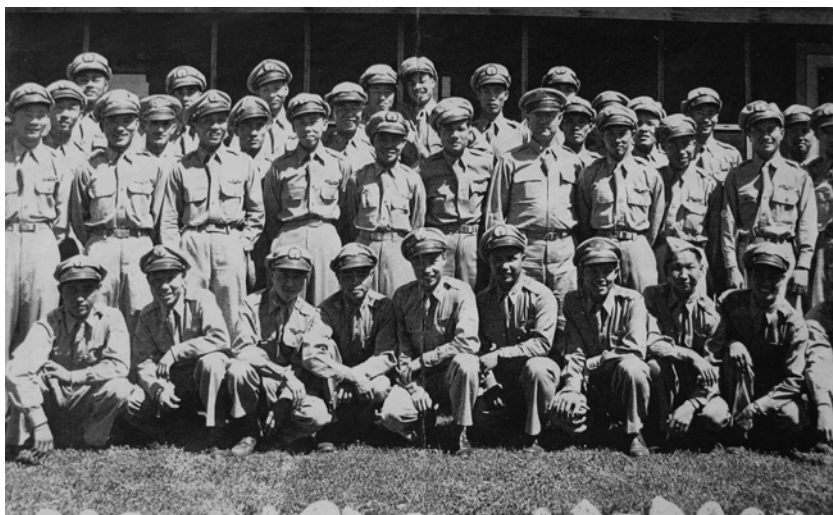


Figure 3 Chinese pilots from the Chinese-American Composite Wing. Image courtesy of Ho Weng Toh, reproduced with permission.



Figure 4 Ho Weng Toh in front of the squadron emblem of the 1st Bombardment Squadron, Chinese American Composite Wing. Image courtesy of Ho Weng Toh, reproduced with permission.



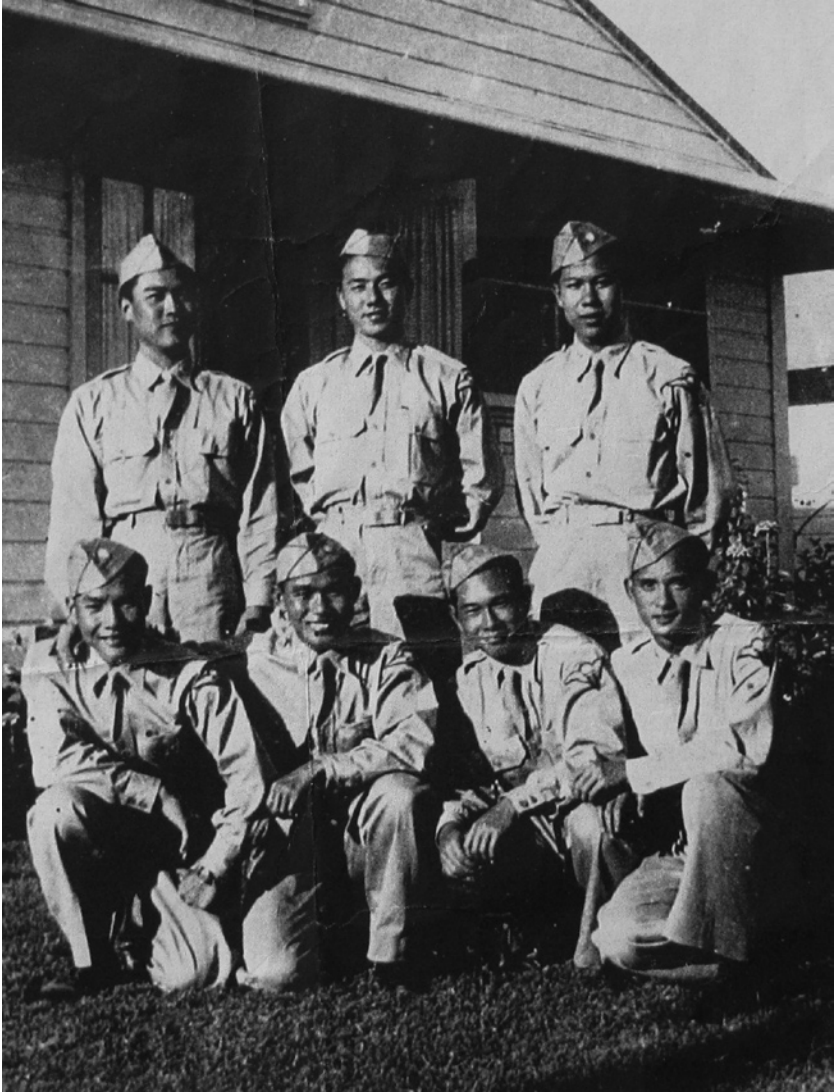


Figure 5 Malayan Chinese pilots from the CNAC and the Composite Wing in 1945. Image courtesy of Ho Weng Toh, reproduced with permission.



Figure 6 Ho Weng Toh gets his wings on graduation day in Douglas, Arizona, 1944. Image courtesy of Ho Weng Toh, reproduced with permission.



Figure 7 Ho Weng Toh (far right) at a c.2005 reunion of the Chinese-American Composite Wing in the United States. Image courtesy of Ho Weng Toh, reproduced with permission.



Figure 8 Malayan Chinese student refugees, 1942. Image courtesy of Ho Weng Toh, reproduced with permission.

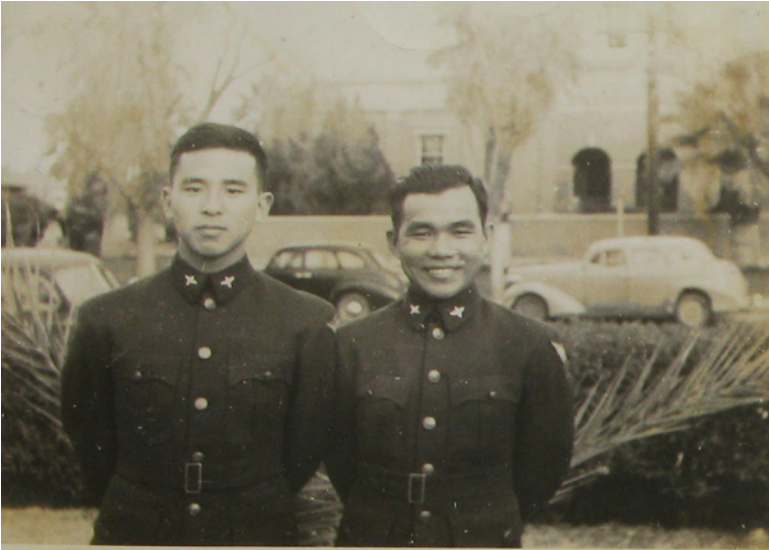


Figure 9 Pilot cadets Ho Weng Toh (right) and Yow Siew Wah in Arizona, 1944. Image courtesy of Ho Weng Toh, reproduced with permission.





## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE IMPERIAL WAR

A few weeks after Philippe Pétain's French government signed an armistice with Germany on 22 June 1940, the British magazine *Punch* published a cartoon depicting two soldiers, both looking across the English Channel. The first makes an observation. "So our poor Empire is alone in the world", to which the second responds, "Aye, yes we are—the whole five hundred million of us."<sup>1</sup> The cartoon serves to capture, in a clever quip, the nature of the imperial war. It was a remarkable contemporary observation about a major oversight in the official British attitude towards the war, a sentiment best expressed by the nation's wartime Prime Minister Winston Churchill on 4 June, as France neared collapse in the face of a German onslaught. In a speech to the House of Commons, Churchill had declared that Britain would "ride out the tyranny of war . . . if necessary alone."<sup>2</sup> But of course, as observed in the *Punch* cartoon, Britain did not stand alone. It had at its disposal the air, land, and naval forces of the Dominions, India, and the Colonial Empire. It had, politically at its beck and call, access to vast reserves of oil, tin, rubber, tungsten, copper, grain, and other raw materials necessary for making war.

Historians of both the British Empire and of post-colonial Malaysia and Singapore have long understood that Malaya was important to Britain's efforts in Europe and the Mediterranean. Its resource industries, chiefly oil, rubber, and tin, were effectively nationalised when war appeared imminent; in August 1939, the British Cabinet introduced a bill that conferred emergency powers on the Crown, allowing the British government to take control, if necessary, of services, businesses, and property "throughout the realm."<sup>3</sup> Legislation that fixed prices of raw materials in the colony and gave the government priority in purchases swiftly followed, so much so that by the fall of France, Malaya's erstwhile private resource industries were effectively co-opted into the Colonial Office.

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<sup>1</sup> *Punch*, 17 July 1940.

<sup>2</sup> *The Times*, 5 June 1940.

<sup>3</sup> W.K. Hancock and M.M. Gowing, *British War Economy* (His Majesty's Stationery Office: London, 1949), 85.

But to limit Malaya's involvement in the war to the excavation and supply of natural resources needed for the war effort is problematic. Such an understanding owes much in intellectual heritage to a world systems approach to colonial history, where colonies are traditionally framed within a purely exploitative relationship that is centred on the transfer of material wealth and capital from the periphery to the centre. Viewed through this lens, it is easy to think of the war as having little traction with the colonial citizenry. Yet as we will see in due course, the war mobilised more than just resources. The conflict tapped into deep-seated ideas of, and loyalties to, empire. Individuals found themselves drawn into the conflict in service of a world system that they believed was normal and correct. Nearly two thousand Malayan Chinese came to serve in various Straits Settlements Volunteer Force formations, while thousands more served in civil defence capacities.<sup>4</sup> Others found themselves on far more distant battlefields.

In this chapter, we will examine the experiences of three individuals who found themselves in British military service during the empire's wars against its enemies between 1939 and 1945. Sweeping claims based on life stories are always perilous to make. But in the face of the relative inaccessibility of primary sources on the Chinese who fought in the imperial war outside of Malaya (especially the paucity of quantitative data), a collective biography spun from the lives and experiences of these three individuals provide us with valuable historical insights into life at the periphery of the British Empire. These are stories that are not usually told in post-colonial narratives. They tell us about a faction of Malayan Chinese who thought of themselves as active citizens of the empire, with all the obligations and responsibilities that went with the benefits of orienting themselves towards the Crown. Just as importantly, taken together these stories give us a further nuanced reminder about how the colonial citizenry was a wonderfully complex body of multiple constituencies who, even as late as the mid twentieth century, were perfectly capable of being committed players in the ordering of imperial rule. Within the existing narratives of Singapore's war, this appreciation has steadily lost its resonance.

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<sup>4</sup> CO820/67.

*The 'Normal' Empire*

Imperial historians have demonstrated, comprehensively, that the British Empire was not a structure of global hegemony that held all under its rule under magical thrall. It is not difficult to see why. The empire was a global *mélange* of territories with different legal statuses and affiliations to the Crown. Apart from colonies of rule such as India (politically a 'sub-empire' in its own right), there were settlement colonies like Australia, mandates such as the one in Palestine, protectorates like the Unfederated Malay States, fortresses such as Gibraltar and Malta, treaty ports and concessions in China, condominiums like the Sudan, and 'spheres of interference' in Central Asia. There was no master-plan to British expansion over the centuries. The result was that any at given time only parts of the empire appeared to be in sync with the metropole and fit with imperial strategies and policies. For example, the West Indian colonies and the enclaves along the coast of West Africa were regarded as a troublesome burden by the mid-19th century.<sup>5</sup> The concession port of Canton fell out of favour in the distribution of economic and political resources as Hong Kong and Shanghai grew in importance.

Regardless of the haphazard nature of its expansion, the British Empire was, on the whole, a global community. It embraced, not always warmly, hundreds of millions of people that had been brought into its system. And in places, it was a given in the lives of many that lived within it. Centuries of continued existence, expansion, and victory had created a sense of pride that was internalised as much by those on the empire's geographical peripheries as much as by those that lived in its centre. The sights and sounds of everyday life and popular culture reinforced how normal empire was. Stage productions and literature used it as a canvas upon which sprawling adventure epics and romantic liaisons were created. Songs such as "There'll always be an England", sung not just by expatriates but by Anglophone locals across the world in imperial cities such as Sydney, Singapore, Bombay, Hong Kong, and Vancouver, paid homage to the idea of empire. Newspapers like *The Daily Mail* and *The Straits Times* bore the words "For King and Empire" prominently on their covering titles every day, while BBC radio programmes began with an announcement

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<sup>5</sup> J. Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World-System 1830–1970* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2009), 1–2.

reminding listeners that the broadcast was going out to audiences across the British Empire. Children in schools across the colonies sang “God Save the King” at morning assembly, commemorated imperial holidays, learnt about how the sun never set on the empire, and understood that Britannia ruled the waves as the greatest maritime power in history.

The geographical sprawl of the imperial Second World War owed most of its shape to the British Empire. Without the empire, Britain had no intrinsic conflict with the other Axis protagonists, and so it was largely because of geography that Britain found itself confronting hostile and expansionist regimes in Italy and Japan. This war against two other powers with their own imperial ambitions would transform all of Britain’s overseas possessions in some way. Some were wrought subtly through reflection and reform, while the rest were introduced much more forcefully when a new master brushed the old one aside, as was the case in the Far East.

Even before fighting began in the colonies of British Asia, however, the political and economic cohesiveness of the British world system meant that the whole of the empire was at war against the Nazi state once Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain’s ultimatum to Germany over Poland expired on 3 September 1939. The breathtaking global mobilisation of labour and resources that followed swiftly afterward underscored this fact. Consequently, by the end of the Second World War more than half of British forces committed to war were, in fact, not British. Commonwealth aircrew made up half of Bomber Command’s strength in Europe, while the Royal Indian Air Force had thirty thousand personnel and nine squadrons involved in the Pacific War.<sup>6</sup>

As we saw in Chapter 3, a distinct Chinese community that identified strongly with the imperial system—what we can think of as an imperial diaspora among the Chinese of Malaya—had formed by the interwar period, centred on the Straits Settlements. Part of its emergence was due to opportunism. But there was a much stronger political dimension to this community by the eve of war in Europe. This phenomenon was being pushed along two fronts. First the idea that empire was normal was being entrenched by popular culture (as discussed earlier) and schooling. British imperial history formed one of the core components of study in the curriculum in Christian mission schools as well as independent schools

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<sup>6</sup> A. Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War* (Hambledon Continuum: London, 2006), 6–9.

funded by Anglophone philanthropists. At the Raffles College, students in second year studied the history of the empire, while British political and constitutional history formed the third year syllabus.<sup>7</sup>

The other front lay with the concept of citizenship. When a person was born in the Straits Settlements (the only part of Malaya that was truly a colony in a legal sense; the Malay states were under British protection but technically sovereign sultanates), s/he was granted British nationality by virtue of their being born in British territory. Demographically, a third of the Straits Settlements population across all ethnicities were British nationals. Over time, this had the effect of fostering a notion of citizenship that in turn introduced to the community notions of rights and duty. These duties included, Chua Ai Lin explains, an allegiance to the Crown and the system of British imperial rule in exchange for democratic participation as befitting their status as *citizens* (and not just subjects) of the British Empire.<sup>8</sup> In 1940, the Straits Chinese British Association petitioned the government of the Straits Settlements for the creation of a formal military regiment comprised of local-born Chinese troops. This was, in their words, a way of making “British subjectship and its privileges and responsibilities more real and vital to our people”.<sup>9</sup> Letters appeared in the press explaining this rise in interest in the defence and running of the colony. “[I]t is our loyalty and sense of citizenship”, wrote one Chinese British subject to the *Malaya Tribune*, “which instils in our hearts a desire to take a greater share in and shoulder greater responsibilities of the administration of this Colony.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, this community did not take greater political rights to be a precursor to nationalism and independence. Rather, they viewed as natural a political relationship that existed between the imperial centre and the colonial periphery, but wanted it to be forged on the basis of equality, rights, and responsibilities to the system. Empire itself was, therefore, normal.

Like the China diaspora after July 1937, the Chinese of Malaya who identified chiefly with Britain rallied to the defence of the empire when war became imminent. In 1934, the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements voted to donate 500,000 Straits Dollars as a gift “over and above

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<sup>7</sup> *Raffles College Calendar*, 1932–1933, pp. 26–29.

<sup>8</sup> A.L. Chua, “Imperial Subjects, Straits Citizens: Anglophone Asians and the Struggle for Political Rights in inter-war Singapore”. in Barr, M. and Trocki, C. (eds.). *Paths Not Taken: Political Pluralism in Post-War Singapore* (NUS Press: Singapore, 2008), 21–23.

<sup>9</sup> Chua, “Imperial Subjects, Straits Citizens”, 27.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in Chua, “Imperial Subjects, Straits Citizens”, 23.

the annual Defence Contribution of 4,000,000 Straits Dollars". In 1935, the Council voted that the motion be repeated again.<sup>11</sup> The Malayan Patriotic Fund for Britain was established just days after Chamberlain's declaration of war in 1939. The Colonial Secretary for Chinese Affairs Arthur Goodman noted its success in collecting donations from the local community for Britain's war. "Much might be written," he commented, "on the way the community took this cause to heart, but it will suffice to record that subscriptions to this fund were received from rickshaw pullers, and the girls [even] undertook knitting garments for the troops."<sup>12</sup> More generous acts from the wealthier members of the imperial diaspora followed. At the height of the Battle of Britain in August 1940, *The Times* reported that a group wealthy "King's Chinese merchants" raised 20,000 Straits Dollars towards the purchase of aircraft for the RAF.<sup>13</sup>

As a war tied into imperial networks across the globe, what is particularly striking is the geographical expansiveness of this Second World War. Yet, this is not a characteristic that is common to the way Singapore's national war has been constructed, and therefore underscores the importance of making distinct the imperial conflict. Some members of the imperial diaspora travelled to serve, as will be noted later. Others served whilst on their travels. As we saw earlier in this book, such was the case with RAF pilot Chew Teng Soon whose fragmentary record of service was canvassed as an example of the problematic archives of mobility in Chapter Two.

As was the case with his contemporaries from Rhodesia, Australia, New Zealand, Jamaica, India, Newfoundland, or Canada, for Chew it was unlikely that the dictates from Whitehall were what propelled him into volunteering for the RAF in defence of the realm. Instead, it almost certainly involved some combination of the lure of military adventure with a sense of affinity for the empire, what it stood for, and its perceived endurance and longevity.

Here, then, is once again an opportunity for historians to use what we know of the lives of individuals like Chew and those like him covered in this book to foreground the links forged by movement, and the flows of ideas backwards and forwards from the imperial centre to the colonial

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<sup>11</sup> Chua, "Imperial Subjects, Straits Citizens", 26.

<sup>12</sup> *Annual Report of Secretary for Chinese Affairs, Malaya, 1939*, 12.

<sup>13</sup> *The Times*, 16 August 1940.

periphery. As opposed to nationalist historiography, which renders these connections into an alien force, these links were the core characteristics of empire: a field of migration—of people, and of ideas—and a creator of diasporas, resulting in Scots in the Falklands, Irish in Australia, Chinese in Canada, or Indians in South Africa. In Chew's case, the ideological affiliations that ran from England to Singapore brought him to Britain for his studies on the eve of war. Scrutiny of his enlistment papers reveal that very little time passed between Chamberlain's declaration of war on Germany and the commencement of his service with the RAF, which hints at the enthusiasm in which he threw himself into his obligations as an imperial citizen.

Chew was not alone in his European sojourn in defence of the empire. A similar example follows with the story of a mariner by the name of Lee Kim Hock, as told in oral history interviews as well as personal and shipping records.

#### *Lee Kim Hock*

Lee was 17 years old when he signed up with the Ocean SS Co. in Singapore. Fourth in a family of seven children, by his teens Lee was working in the harbour ward as a dock coolie. His work on the docks put him in daily contact with sailors coming from overseas ports, and Lee made it a point to strike up a conversation with any Chinese seamen he came across. Over time, stories of exotic destinations and a life defined by travel built up an idea of an exciting world beyond Singapore. His household situation only fed his desire. His father had abandoned the family after his youngest sister was born, and the children who were old enough to find paid work helped sustain the family. Lee's frustration at the prospect of a monotonous life spent working on the docks increased as he watched ships leave the harbour each day, and soon the half-joking suggestions that sailors made to him about joining a merchant shipping company as a rating became a serious option. In 1935, with the assistance of a Boatswain's Mate on the SS *Nestor* that he befriended, he managed to convince the captain of the vessel to take him on as a replacement for a crew member that had jumped ship in Singapore.

The *Nestor* was a coal-fired ship. With a displacement of around fifteen thousand tons, it needed a large crew of ratings dedicated to keeping its furnaces fed with coal at sea. Although he started out as a deckboy, Lee

soon found himself working in the engine room department as a trimmer after being trained on Mann Island in Liverpool, England:

The stokers were all big men, because you needed to be able to keep going for hours without much rest, and for every day... We took turns having weekends, you know! If we were not in port, then we were at work. My job as a trimmer was to make sure that the coal was distributed evenly in the ship's hold. If there was too much coal on one side, then there would be a list... Working on a ship or as a coolie, it was the same. You could not say that one was tougher. For me, what was important was that I was able to see the world. I have been to Havana, Cape Town, Adelaide, Liverpool, Halifax, New York. So many places, I cannot remember all of them. Some places we only saw once, for a few days, and other places we went back several times... they became like homes to me. Not many people those days even got out of Malaya, so I was happy with what I was doing.<sup>14</sup>

One of those 'homes' that Lee became attached to was the city of Liverpool, where the Ocean SS Co. was headquartered and where the *Nestor* often found itself at harbour. Lee struck up several friendships with members of the Chinese community in the city, and from them he came to learn about the culture and politics of Great Britain. In 1938, he travelled by train to London for the first time, and was amazed at the sights in the capital of the British Empire. It was, in the young sailor's mind, awe-inspiring and drove home the grandeur and the appropriateness of imperial rule:

I became very pro-Britain after being in London. The grand buildings, the status of the city, the underground, and the way everything was ordered. But if you asked me if it was just because of this visit, I would say no. I had seen other parts of the UK before that, and I had visited many of the lands that the British had colonised, like Sierra Leone, India, and Australia. And of course Singapore... For me, Britain was doing a great job in developing these places... Yes, they ruled other people against their will sometimes, but it was for their own good. I believed that.<sup>15</sup>

Not long after his visit to the English capital, Lee had the chance to affirm his support for the empire. The invasion of Poland by German troops in September 1939 brought war to Britain and France. While the British Expeditionary Force was dispatched to France as it was in the First World War, on land the shooting war would not begin for nine more months.

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<sup>14</sup> Author's interview with Lee Kim Hock, translated from Mandarin, 9/12/2009.

<sup>15</sup> Author's interview with Lee Kim Hock, translated from Mandarin, 9/12/2009.



At sea, however, it was a very different story, especially for merchant shipping flying under the British flag.

As a maritime power, Britain had for nearly two centuries relied on the size of its merchant fleet for the empire's economic health, and on the strength of its navy to ensure that sea lanes remained open to the Home Islands. War supplies for its armed forces and industries as well as imported food products for the civilian population needed to be delivered in sufficient quantities to ensure that the armed forces could remain effective, and that civilian morale did not collapse. In a war situation, all commercial shipping movements came under the jurisdiction of a section of the Naval Staff known as the Trade Division (which was later absorbed into the Ministry of War Transport). The Trade Division and the Ministry of War Transport liaised with private owners to form convoys protected by Royal Navy or Royal Canadian Navy ships. Many merchant vessels, however, made the trans-Atlantic passage independently.

Despite the fact that the Germans had successes in using submarines against merchant shipping in the First World War, the Admiralty underestimated the threat posed by 'U-boats' (to use the anglicised abbreviation of the German word for submarine, *unterseeboot*). Much of the overconfidence stemmed from a misplaced faith in inter-war advances in anti-submarine technology, and so merchant losses to U-boat attacks in the first three years of the war in Europe were staggering. In 1940, 471 ships (totaling over two million tons) were sunk through submarine attacks; in 1941, 432 ships (approximately the same tonnage) were lost to U-boats; the following year, casualties mounted as a result of the United States' entry into the war and the lack of protection for US merchant shipping. In the first six months of 1942 alone, 526 Allied ships were sunk by submarines, and by the end of the year a total of 1,160 vessels had been destroyed (over six million tons in total).<sup>16</sup> The losses to merchant shipping in the Atlantic led to growing recognition that organising merchant vessels into convoys was the most effective protection against the submarine threat. Statistically, it gave the vessels the best chance of surviving the trans-Atlantic crossing. Morale was also an important factor, as merchant crew were kept in positive spirits by the sight of convoy escorts.

Considering the damage that German surface raiders and submarines were inflicting on trans-Atlantic shipping, the *Nestor* led a charmed life

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<sup>16</sup> B.B. Schofield, "The Defeat of the U-Boats during World War II", *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 16 (1), 1981, 123–124.

as attacks seemed to occur in places where the ship was not present. Yet the hazardous conditions faced by the crew of the Royal Merchant Navy prompted Lee to consider if he would be better off returning to Singapore. After pondering his options for a week in Liverpool, he decided to return:

I thought that I would be abandoning the merchant navy when it needed people like me the most. We were civilians, but we were also important for the war effort . . . Without us, Britain would be defeated. If I could do something about it, then I had to. So I stayed.<sup>17</sup>

In November 1940, Lee joined the Lamport and Holt Line, a large maritime merchant corporation based in Liverpool that helped manage and provide crew for ships acquired by the Ministry of War Transport. As fate would have it, Lee's eventual posting was one such vessel received by the company in June, the *Empire Mouflon*. The *Mouflon* belonged to the 'Empire' class of merchantman, which were freight carriers in all respects but one—each vessel of the class was fitted with a rocket-propelled catapult, on top of which sat a Hawker Sea Hurricane, a single-engine fighter aircraft. A total of thirty-five Catapult Aircraft Merchantman (more commonly known as CAM ships) were purchased by the British government between 1941 and 1942, and all bore the part name 'Empire' to designate their purpose in the convoy system.<sup>18</sup>

The necessity of the CAM ship is easy to appreciate. From the outbreak of war, long-range German bombers were able to assail British merchantmen with impunity by launching attacks on ships in the middle of the Atlantic, where British and Canadian fighter aircraft were unable to reach due to their limited range. The urgent need to combat this problem was readily apparent to the Royal Navy within a year of the outbreak of war. German aircraft had sunk over 350,000 tons of shipping between June 1940 and February the following year.<sup>19</sup> In response, the Royal Navy placed an order for small escort carriers to offer aerial protection for merchant convoys in May 1941, but none would be ready for the better part of a year. CAM, therefore, emerged as an innovative, stop-gap solution that allowed convoys to launch fighters (with the pilot assigned by RAF Fighter Command) in the middle of the Atlantic if the convoy came under attack

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<sup>17</sup> Author's interview with Lee Kim Hock, translated from Mandarin, 9/12/2009.

<sup>18</sup> See W.H. Mitchell and L.A. Sawyer, *The Empire Ships* (Lloyds of London Press Ltd.: London, 1990).

<sup>19</sup> J. Scutts, *The Fw200 Condor* (Crecy Publishing: Manchester, 2008), 26.

by German aircraft. Once the threat had been dealt with, the aircraft was ditched into the sea, and the pilot recovered by one of the escort craft.

Lee's first Atlantic crossings aboard the *Empire Mouflon* were without incident. The ship departed Liverpool as part of convoy ON 35 on 9 November 1941, and arrived in Halifax, Nova Scotia just over two weeks later, after which it was kept in port with boiler issues, which restricted it to shorter trips around the eastern coast of North America. It only made the return voyage across the Atlantic on 24 March the following year, this time with the convoy SC 76, carrying a cargo of grain.<sup>20</sup> While there were no attacks on either leg of the Atlantic passage, fear and anxiety proved to be a greater enemy. The catapult, which was supposed to add protection to the group, gave the crew of the *Empire Mouflon* additional cause for concern:

You feel worse when you are allowed outside. While you're on watch, you are kept too busy to think about what might happen. But when you are off duty, the idle time creates a lot of tension and pressure. . . . A lot of us did not like the CAM, because we thought the U-boats would single us out. . . . Some of the new crew could not take the stress so well, and sometimes one of them became convinced that the ship was about to be attacked and leapt into the sea. They went crazy from fear. . . . Some of them were picked up, the others we never heard of again. . . . the convoy was too big and important to turn around for one man.<sup>21</sup>

Lee's first experience of a U-boat attack came as the *Empire Mouflon* left New York for Liverpool on 3 October 1942 with the convoy SC 104. German submarines struck just over a week later. He was off-duty at the time, and out on deck when the attack began in the dead of the night. He remembered its start vividly:

I was smoking outside during my break with a friend, who was an engine room storekeeper. It was probably around 1 am, the ocean was calm, and there was very little moonlight so it was very dark. . . . There was a big explosion from the ship on our starboard (left). That ship was close enough to us that I felt the heat from the explosion and the force threw us backwards. . . . I do not know what it was carrying, but it must have been ammunition because it was such a roar, and the ship seemed to leap out of the water. Its back was broken instantly, and it went down with the bow and stern in the air. . . . I did not even hear screaming, it was so loud and quick. I think it must have been two or three minutes [from the explosion to the

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<sup>20</sup> Public Records Office BT389/10.

<sup>21</sup> Author's interview with Lee Kim Hock, translated from Mandarin, 9/12/2009.

ship sinking], and then there was just burning oil on the surface, and some debris . . . There was no time to help or do anything . . . I will never forget, at that moment I thought, "So that is how quick it can happen."<sup>22</sup>

The vessel described by Lee would most likely have been the fuel tanker *Southern Empress*, which is described by the *Registry of Shipping and Seamen* as being part of SC 104, and was the victim of a torpedo (from U-221) just past midnight on 14 October. It was listed as carrying a load of 11,700 tons of fuel oil and a deck cargo of twenty-one landing craft and sank with forty-eight crew dead, over two thirds of its ratings.<sup>23</sup> The attack by the submarine pack continued over four days, and by the time the surviving ships of the mauled convoy arrived in Liverpool on 21 October they had lost eight of their number, including—ominously for Lee and his fellow mariners—the CAM ship *Empire Mersey*.

Lee would go on to make several more Atlantic crossings and survive the war, aided by Allied advances in anti-submarine technology such as radar and sonar as well as the cracking of encrypted German naval codes. But the attack on convoy SC 104 would not be the last U-boat attack he would experience:

Most of the time I was below deck in the engine room, so I did not get to see what was happening. I just heard what people told me . . . But sometimes, when it was not my watch, I would go up for some air. There I would see all sorts of things. Wooden beams, shoes, sometimes a body. At other times, we would pass by a ship that was about to slip under the sea . . . After awhile, I learned either not to spend so much time outside, or if I was out, I would just look past all these things. For me, they became part of the background.<sup>24</sup>

That the imperial war as fought by men like Lee was a global conflict is evidenced by even a cursory glance at the Merchant Shipping Movement Cards of the vessels that he served on. These detail every departure by a given vessel during its time of operation in the Royal Merchant Navy. Apart from Halifax, New York, and Liverpool, Lee called at a range of other ports from Reykjavik and Port Said to Haifa and Trinidad. The cargo of war was just as diverse, with the ships he served on carrying anything from cement and steel to salted fish and explosives.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Author's interview with Lee Kim Hock, translated from Mandarin, 9/12/2009.

<sup>23</sup> Public Records Office BT347/8; for a fully indexed list of merchant losses to German submarine attacks and the submarines credited with sinking them, see *Lloyd's War Losses: the Second World War* (Lloyds of London Press Ltd., Vol. 1, 1989).

<sup>24</sup> Author's interview with Lee Kim Hock, translated from Mandarin, 9/12/2009.

<sup>25</sup> Public Records Office BT 389/9, BT 389/11, and BT 389/24.

By February 1944, Lee Kim Hock had left Lampport and Holt Line. Working now for the shipping company Bibby Line Ltd. on the armed merchant cruiser HMS *Derbyshire*, he found himself in the port of Naples in Italy, a world away from Singapore. He was allowed a brief spell of shore leave, and marvelled at the sights of the city as the ship unloaded its vital cargo of troops for the Allied offensive to the north. In an interview, he recalled that the pasta he had while on his first day on shore leave was the finest he had ever tasted in his life before or since. What also left a deep impression on him were the large crowds of men and women in military uniform milling about, and the seemingly endless drone of aircraft overhead. It would have been easy for Lee to feel alone and alien in the mass of Allied personnel. But at the time, Lee could not have known that the war had brought another compatriot to southern Italy as well, in support of the same cause.

### *Tan Kay Hai*

Tan Kay Hai was born in 1914 to a wealthy Chinese family that had made its fortune in Malaya through the rubber trade. During his formative years, there were clear signs too of a gradual but steady identification with the British system. As a boy, he attended a Chinese language primary school, Tuan Mong, but by the time he was in his teens he had enrolled in the English-medium St. Andrew's School, and was a member of the Church of England. His religious view was a key pillar in shaping his belief in the importance of the imperial order in bringing modernity to the Chinese of colonial Singapore. In a speech to his alma mater in 1948, Tan highlighted that "Europeans, no matter which group of people, all believe in God, while Chinese nationals worship ancestors. If we could be like the Europeans and have the same belief in God, in addition to our tight Chinese connections, we will be stronger."<sup>26</sup>

Apart from his belief in the strengthening benefits of the Church, there is little doubt that at least some of Tan's receptiveness to empire stemmed from the fact that his family had done well financially out of the colonial system. His family's wealth also enabled him to indulge in his passion for machinery, especially aircraft. By the time he was in his twenties, he was already a member of the Royal Singapore Flying Club and in his spare

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<sup>26</sup> *Tuan Mong Old Boys; Association 25th Anniversary Special Issue* (Tuan Mong Association: Singapore, 1948).

time had learnt to fly the de Havilland Tiger Moth, a single-engine biplane in service with the Royal Air Force. For most of the time that he was on the ground, Tan worked as a car salesman in Malayan Motors, where his familiarity with the internal combustion engine and his fluent English came in handy when dealing with customers.

After the fall of France in 1940 Tan began to consider enlisting in the RAF. His family tells of a genuine desire to serve the empire, to stand up for an order that was “right and good” and in opposition to destructive and expansionist powers, as he told indicated to his son decades later.<sup>27</sup> There were a number of obstacles in the way, however. He was short—five feet and six inches—and at 26 he was older than most enlistees. Equally important was the fact that he was a husband and a father. In June the year before, Tan had married Lucy Chan Aw Sou, and in April 1940 she bore the couple’s first son, Tan Thuan Kok. A second son was born in May the following year. Since the RAF traditionally preferred to enlist men without family responsibilities, it seemed for a time that his desire to defend the empire would go unfulfilled.

But in October 1941, Tan got the break he was hoping for. Along with over a hundred others in Singapore, he responded to a call for pilots to be trained for service in the war in Europe under a military aviation instruction program known as the British Empire Air Training Scheme (BEATS).<sup>28</sup> This was a scheme that was created to train aircrew at specially-opened bases in Canada, South Africa, Southern Rhodesia, Australia, and New Zealand. Its significance increased in importance after the fall of France. With RAF squadrons depleted from the disastrous campaign on the continent, Britain faced a desperate need for aircrew to stave off the coming aerial. Guided by a potent mix of urgency on the part of its organisers and enthusiasm among the hundreds of thousands of volunteers it elicited, it grew to become the largest aviation training scheme in history, producing nearly 170,000 personnel, with nearly a third pilots.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Author’s correspondence with Tan Thuan Seng, 7/2/2011.

<sup>28</sup> The figure of 114 volunteers from Singapore appears twice, both in press reports: the first in the *Straits Times*, 10 October 1945, and the second in the *Singapore Free Press*, 24 September 1960. Unfortunately the PRO does not have any documents that might support or challenge the reliability of these reports. Nor has the author been able to identify any more than a handful of these individuals, and even then their records are fragmentary and only of very limited value to historians.

<sup>29</sup> Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War*, 39; see also J.M. McCarthy, *A last call of empire: Australian aircrew, Britain and the Empire Air Training Scheme* (Australian War Memorial: Canberra, 1988).

The success of the program was a testament to the amount of loyalty to the imperial system present throughout the British Empire. It also opened the way for individuals from the colonies to be coached in military aviation. With Britain's war situation in Europe still bleak, RAF recruitment was happy to overlook Tan's age and family commitments, and allowed him to enlist as an airman. In November 1941 he left Singapore by ship for Canada, without the knowledge that war would come to Malaya before the year was out. If he had known that Singapore would be under Japanese occupation just months after his departure, and if he had known that he would not hear from his family or know of their fate for the next four years, he would probably have felt worse about the fact that he had lied about the details of his enlistment with the RAF to his parents and his wife. Instead, he had told them that he was joining a program to be trained as a commercial pilot.<sup>30</sup> As it were, he was bending the truth; he was not selected initially for combat flying. Rather he had been earmarked as a service pilot. His brief, if he successfully qualified for his flying badge, would be fairly mundane, mostly involving ferrying aircraft to and from frontline bases or towing targets for anti-aircraft artillery practice.

A close examination of Tan's personal flying log book reveals the expanse of his travels over the next four years. He arrived at Service Flying Training School Number 33 near the town of Carberry in Manitoba, Canada. Instruction in the Avro Anson, a twin-engine trainer, commenced on 8 December, just as news of Japanese aggression in the Pacific was breaking.<sup>31</sup> It was at Royal Canadian Air Force Station Carberry (the more widely-used name of the training school) that he became close friends with an English pilot trainee, Robert Stone, who provided the following description of their time together in Canada to Tan's granddaughter many decades later:

I first met him when we were training in Canada on a fairly long course at the end of which we were awarded our flying "wings" ... There were about sixty of us on this course and as you may know, your Grandfather and I came in the first two places at the end of the course. Our training consisted of both flying aeroplanes and classroom work on a variety of subjects. Our positions on this course depended on adding up the results of our flying tests and the results of our classroom examinations. I always felt that

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<sup>30</sup> Author's interview with Li Er Hanson, 30/1/2011.

<sup>31</sup> The details of Tan's training and service in the RAF as described in this article come from records listed in his official pilot's flight logbooks, which are currently in the possession of his granddaughter Li Er Hanson nee Tan.



your grandfather was a better pilot than I was but not so successful in the classroom.<sup>32</sup>

On 31 January 1942, Tan completed his last training flight in Carberry. Less than two months later he received his flying badge and was commissioned as a Pilot Officer in the General Duties Branch. He was then transferred to England for two months of advanced flight training at Leconfield, Yorkshire. September brought another move, this time to No. 31 Operational Training Unit at Bicester, Oxfordshire. There, he learned how to pilot the Bristol Blenheim, a versatile light bomber that was the mainstay of the RAF's service arm. But by April 1943, Tan would be in North Africa with No. 225 Squadron and flying a very different aircraft and performing duties that were the furthest thing from service flying. A slice of good fortune in the larger scheme of things provided the intervention that was necessary. Robert Stone takes up the story:

Anyway for the three months in Canada we were fairly close but when we returned to England we went separate ways. I had no knowledge of what your Grandfather was doing and had no means of contacting him. In fact we were both being trained, at separate RAF stations, to fly light bombers (the Bisley, a version of the more famous Blenheim light bomber) and our destination, as it turned out, was the same. We were both bound for Algiers and the war in North Africa. Having arrived out there and being posted to a squadron at the front I was met with the position that the Bisley had been such a disaster in action, with very heavy losses, that it was decided to withdraw it from use. I was returned to a camp at Algiers which was full of aircrew with no specific jobs to do and it was there that I met your grandfather again. He had had a similar set of experiences as I had met.<sup>33</sup>

The vulnerability of the Bisley against German fighters in North Africa meant that the aircraft was decommissioned by all but four RAF squadrons in the theatre by May 1943. This turn of events, coupled with aircrew losses that needed to be replaced expeditiously among the frontline squadrons of the RAF, meant that pilots like Tan and Stone, who had been trained for roles in an aircraft now considered obsolete, were quickly pressed into other flight duties. In Tan Kay Hai's case, he was transferred to a combat reconnaissance squadron, No. 225, and underwent retraining in the single-engine Supermarine Spitfire. He was a particularly suitable

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<sup>32</sup> Letter from Robert P. Stone to Li Er Hanson, 20 August 2001 (from the Hanson family's personal collection).

<sup>33</sup> Letter from Robert P. Stone to Li Er Hanson, 20 August 2001 (from the Hanson family's personal collection).



allocation for the squadron in particular, as its complement captured the global nature of the empire's outsourcing of war. Nicknamed "The Foreign Legion Squadron" by the Middle East armed services publication *Union Jack*, Tan was at home among pilots from a constellation of nationalities across the Commonwealth, Dominions, and the Colonies. Even so, he quickly stood out, and gained the endearing moniker "Charlie Chan", after the famous Chinese detective character of Hollywood movies.<sup>34</sup>

"Charlie" found himself in action soon enough, starting with a reconnaissance flight over the Tunisian towns of Bizerte and Tebourba on 28 April. Six more sorties quickly followed over the next two days. As British and American troops launched a major offensive to destroy the remaining German forces in North Africa, Tan flew reconnaissance runs over Pon Du Fah and Mateur on 29 and 30 April with instructions to locate enemy artillery and observe the effect of Allied strikes on them. Some respite came in June after the surrender of German forces in the region, when the squadron was relocated to Bouficha, along the northern coast of the African continent. As the campaign came to a close, the new pilots had the opportunity to undertake further training with new aircraft, with emphasis on formation flying, air-to-ground firing, and aerobatics.

Having defeated the Axis armies in North Africa, Allied planners began turning their attention to the invasion of Europe. While there was some disagreement between the British and American camps on the advantages of an Allied thrust up the Italian peninsula and how much that might delay an invasion of France across the English Channel, by early 1943 the decision was made to open a new military front in Italy. After taking Sicily unopposed, on 3 September British and American forces landed as planned in Salerno, Calabria, and Taranto. The invasion of Italy had the immediate effect of toppling Mussolini's regime—an outcome predicted by the Allies since support among Italy's population and its military for Mussolini had wavered by the end of 1942. The new government headed by Pietro Badoglio announced an armistice, and all Italian military units were ordered to cease military action. But any hope for a quick resolution to the operation was dashed when German troops moved to take over the vacated defences.

In support of the Italian campaign, No. 225 Squadron found itself occupied with reconnaissance duties over southern Italy. On 1 October,

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<sup>34</sup> *Union Jack (Tunisia Daily Edition): The Newspaper for the British Fighting Forces*, No. 60, July 1943.

Tan's Italian war began with a flight over Capua and Volturno, followed by seventy-eight sorties over Casino, Teano, Minturno, Sessa, Pontecovo, Mignano, and Formia as the US Fifth Army made its painful way up the Italian peninsular from the port of Naples. By 27 December, his first tour of the Mediterranean was over, and he was allowed to go on leave for New Year's. He would not have much time away. The squadron was called into action on 2 January as the Allies renewed their attempts to breach the Gustav Line, a chain of formidable and well-marshalled German defences that cut across the breadth of the Italian peninsular south of Rome. It would take four months of intense fighting before American and British forces were able to break through.

By his second tour, Tan seemed to have gained the confidence to begin flying in a more aggressive fashion. Most tactical reconnaissance pilots had to put themselves at great risk. Part of their job was to entice German anti-aircraft positions to give themselves away, which was done by flying at a low enough altitude to make enemy gunners believe that they had a good opportunity to shoot down the aircraft. But Tan developed a reputation for having a cavalier attitude toward these assignments, as his squadron mate Parke F. Smith wrote while corresponding with Tan's granddaughter:

He was an inspiration to us all—cheerful-brave and amusing. He loved to count the anti-aircraft (flak) bursts and figure the cost to the Germans. He often said if they didn't hit him he would bankrupt them!!<sup>35</sup>

Smith was well-placed to observe Tan Kay Hai's flying habits. The Operation Records Books for the squadron reveal that they flew as a pair no less than twenty-four times over a three month period from January to March 1944, including on 13 January where Smith would have observed Tan "registering" (compelling the artillery crews to fire and reveal themselves) and then coming around and strafing two 88 mm Flak gun batteries at Minturno in southern Lazio.<sup>36</sup> Both sets of guns were silenced, while Tan's aircraft was described in his logs as being "holed in rudder" during the attack. Six days later, on 19 January, Tan attacked two further artillery batteries of four guns each at Formia, midway between Rome and Naples. This time, he escaped without noteworthy damage to his aircraft, and a brief comment was appended to his flying log book: "One very successful

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<sup>35</sup> Letter from Parke F. Smith to Li Er Hanson, 28 March 2001 (from the Hanson family's personal collection).

<sup>36</sup> Public Records Office AIR27/20.

Arty/R engaged two targets each of 4 guns firing. In both cases the guns were at least temporarily silenced.”

Tan's successes spurred him to further engagements with German ground forces. On 21 January he attacked a pair of artillery batteries as well as an unrecorded number of enemy tanks and half-track transports at Formia. On 27 January he made life miserable for more German troops at Minturno, and followed that up the next day by strafing a column of approximately eighty tanks at Anzio, where Allied forces were attempting an amphibious landing to bypass the Gustav Line.

It was not long before Tan's daring and accomplishments were noted by his superiors. In light of his exploits in southern Italy, the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder, recommended that Tan receive the Distinguished Flying Cross. In particular, he had been singled out for his actions on two sorties flown on 7 and 8 February. The squadron received the following dispatch from Rear HQ Desert Air Force: “On the recommendation of the A.O.C.in.C. Mediterranean Allied Air Force His Majesty the King has been graciously pleased to award immediate Distinguished Flying Cross to Flying Officer K.H. Tan 225 Squadron.”<sup>37</sup> It was followed three hours later by a congratulatory message from his superior, Captain George Millington, which read: “For Flying Officer Tan from Group Captain Millington. Hearty congratulations on a well deserved award. Your work and courage are an inspiration to your comrades. Have got some ribbon for you and will fly it over on first fine day.”<sup>38</sup> The full text of the recommendation form details the events that transpired on the 7th and 8th, and is worth quoting in full:

On February 7th 1944, F/O Tan set out on a combined vertical photographic and visual reconnaissance in the LITTORIA-CORI area. They arrived during a bombing attack on the beach-head, and 20+ bandits were reported. F/O Tan and his weaver were intercepted by 5. 190's (sic), and they became separated.

On his own, in the face of intense A.A. fire, and knowing that bandits were in the vicinity, F/O Tan successfully completed his mission. In addition to the five pinpoints which he had been briefed to photograph, he photographed two artillery positions, which he pinpointed South of Rome.

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<sup>37</sup> OSN 365, Rear HQ Desert Air Force to No. 225 Squadron, 16 February 1944 (from the Hanson family's personal collection).

<sup>38</sup> OSN 371, No. 285 Wing to No. 225 Squadron, 16 February 1944 (from the Hanson family's personal collection).

One on the following day, he was briefed to do an artillery shoot in the AUSONIA area. He was given the positions of five enemy batteries, and was told to engage three. Nevertheless, he successfully engaged all five of these, then registered a further battery which he had located, and finally successfully engaged a concentration of enemy H.T. (Half-Track transports)

This Officer has now completed 146 hours operational flying with this Squadron, having joined 225 in April 1943. Since then he has served with distinction in N. Africa, Sicily, and Italy. His exceptional keenness, initiative and total disregard of danger, have been an inspiration to his fellow pilots, and the above two examples of his work are in keeping with the high standard he has set during the last few months.<sup>39</sup>

The praise that came with his commendation was not just perfunctory. The ground attacks that Tan undertook in southern Italy were perilous even at the best of times. This was a theatre where German anti-aircraft artillery inflicted abnormally high casualty rates among the four thousand Allied aircraft deployed in the campaign, with an estimated seven hundred shot down or otherwise damaged beyond repair by flak, and over five thousand aircrew losing their lives by VE (Victory in Europe) Day. Tan certainly had his close calls during his time in Italy, though ultimately it was not ground fire that ended his war. On 25 January his aircraft suffered serious damage flying over Rome on a reconnaissance mission; two months later, on 24 March he was holed in the fuselage near the Italian capital; and on 6 and 9 April his Spitfire took several hits from flak at Ausonia and Priverno respectively. Each time, he was fortunate enough that the damage was not so significant that he could not return to base, although the incident on 6 April was enough to force him to land instead of completing his mission. The level of risk that Tan was prepared to accept in his undertakings in Italy give us a hint into the level of devotion he felt to the empire. It would be prudent, of course to accept that some of his desire for adventure as being one of the possible reasons for his cavalier approach towards flying. Yet as he revealed to his son after the war, Tan's belief in the righteousness of his defence of the imperial system was an unshakeable source of strength and motivation in those perilous moments.<sup>40</sup>

When he was not being shot at in the skies over Lazio and Rome, Tan appeared to take delight in learning more about the settings and cultures that war had brought him in contact with, and anecdotal evidence suggests that he was thoroughly enjoying himself in an almost boyish manner

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<sup>39</sup> Public Records Office AIR2/9259.

<sup>40</sup> Author's correspondence with Tan Thuan Seng, 7/2/2011.

despite the worry he must have felt not knowing the fate of his parents, his wife, and his children back in occupied Singapore. Photographs of his time in North Africa reveal a man constantly beaming, even when caught on camera at awkward moments such as when one of his comrades playfully surprised him with a camera and took a snap of him showering. His squadron mate Parke Smith provided further insight about Tan's ability to adapt to new environments:

I...remembered he was quite a linguist and recalled the astonished looks on the faces of those Italians when they saw him, a man from China, speaking Italian with a broad English accent.<sup>41</sup>

In May 1944, Tan's time with No. 225 Squadron came to an end. As the Allies prepared for the invasion of France, Italy became a sideshow in the European war and he was reassigned to a new squadron, RAF No. 2, at Gatwick on 2 May. In doing so, he joined the hundreds of thousands of personnel being assembled for the landings at Normandy. Twelve thousand aircraft, seven thousand ships, and nearly two hundred thousand soldiers would be used to establish a beachhead in northern France, from which a drive towards Paris, the Low Countries, and Germany could be staged. The logistics and coordination for such an enormous endeavour was nothing short of staggering, and each unit and every soldier, pilot, and seaman would have had their own preparations to make as fighting formations and as individuals. Tan's was to undertake training in a new aircraft. Unlike No. 225 Squadron, his new posting operated US-made North American Aviation P-51 Mustangs, and so from 16 May to 4 June Tan was put through his paces learning its characteristics. He seemed to have found the aircraft trickier to handle, for on 19 May he suffered his first and only recorded accident when he crashed on take-off. He evidently walked away unscathed. The next day he was well enough to fly two more practice sorties, this time without incident.

On D-Day, 6 June, RAF No. 2 was moved to the Royal Naval Air Station *Daedalus*, just outside the erstwhile sleepy seaside town of Lee-on-the-Solent in the south of England. The airbase was a staging point for much of the Allied aerial armada flying in support of the invasion force, and so was a hive of activity. Tan's first mission that morning was a spotting operation for naval artillery over the section of the Normandy coast where

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<sup>41</sup> Letter from Parke F. Smith to Li Er Hanson, 28 March 2001 (from the Hanson family's personal collection).

British troops were coming ashore, designated by the Allies as 'Sword Beach'. A second sortie later that day saw Tan dispatched to Montdidier and Beauvais, near the city of Amiens. On the evening of 7 June, he was sent to inspect a set of bridges over the River Seine. True to form, in his report, he noted that he had taken a brief opportunity to fire on German ground forces he had come across under cover:

Bridge M.1011 down A.L.S. Bridge at R.1199 down. At Fremcuse M.1701 8 barges lying in pairs on S. Bank. Bridge at R.2200 down. One barge at R.2200. Every bridge from Elbouee to Bonnières completely or partly demolished. Shot up two covered m.e.t. 15/30 outside Boiesmont R.4596 strikes seen, transport stopped. Four soldiers ran from one. Rounds fell among them. Results unobserved.<sup>42</sup>

As dawn broke on 13 June, Tan carried out another flight over the Seine. This time, he came across a tank "with a large gun", headed west. He strafed it, but in his report concluded that was unsure if he had successfully destroyed it. The rest of the month continued without much incident, except for when he was damaged by light flak over Pontoise, northwest of Paris, on 19 June. Eight days later, he flew a sortie that took him over Tourouvre, before transferring with the rest of No. 2 Squadron to an airfield outside the Hampshire village of Odiham on 27 June. It was to be the last combat sortie that Tan would complete. An account of his final mission over France two days later follows.<sup>43</sup>

On Thursday, 29 June, Tan was sent as the second aircraft of a brace to reconnoitre an area near Paris. There had been little sign of *Luftwaffe* fighters over the past few days, and the anti-aircraft artillery was so sparsely spread across ground they were covering that the pilots were hardly threatened. It was to be an uneventful mission, or so it seemed. Just as the pair began their homeward leg, Tan noticed eight aircraft approaching them. At first, he thought that they were Allied airplanes. But a closer examination revealed that they were, in fact, German ME109s. The Germans broke into two groups, four of them headed for Tan, while the remainder sought out the other Allied plane.

Tan turned his plane around to face his attackers, but as he came around he was hit by cannon fire from one of the ME109s. His right wing

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<sup>42</sup> Public Records Office AIR2/9259.

<sup>43</sup> For the description of Tan's misadventures on 29 June, I am indebted to Ian Mackersey. See I. Mackersey, *Into the Silk: True Stories of the Caterpillar Club* (Robert Hale Ltd.: London, 1956).

was destroyed, and his aircraft went into a terminal spin. He had been flying at low level when the German scored the fatal hits on his plane, and by the time he was able to leap clear from the stricken aircraft he was just a few hundred feet above the ground—a hair's breadth in flying terms, considering that he would have been falling at a rate of around eighty to one hundred feet per second. He was successful in deploying his parachute, but because it had been borrowed from a squadron mate that morning it did not fit snugly around Tan's tiny frame. The end result was that he hung out of his harness face-down, rather than upright as he was supposed to. It was at this awkward angle that he crashed into the ground. As Tan later revealed:

For a moment, I felt dazed, then I heard something moving. I looked up and saw some cows gazing down at me. My first instinct was to hide the parachute. I tried to get up but felt a sharp pain on my left side and lay down again. Blood was dripping from my nose and mouth. I suddenly felt my heart thumping hard and was frightened. Frantically I looked for injuries but found none. How relieved I was when I realized (sic) that the blood from my nose and mouth was not from an internal haemorrhage but from the parting blow my oxygen mask had given me when I was thrown clear.<sup>44</sup>

Tan had deployed the parachute so close to the ground that there was just barely enough time for it to slow his rate of descent. But even though it saved his life, he was in bad shape. He had three broken ribs on his left side, a broken right foot, and a dislocated shoulder from the upward force exerted on his body by the parachute's opening. After taking a few moments to collect his senses, he staggered across the pasture and onto a road that ran alongside it with his parachute bundled under his good arm. From his last moments in the air, he had a sense that he was just north of Paris, and hence still in German-occupied France. His instinct drove him to see if he could get assistance from the locals.

If he had hoped that he would gain some sympathy, even protection, from French civilians on account of the fact that his uniform would have denoted him to be a pilot with the Allied forces currently liberating their country, then he would have been sorely disappointed with the reception at the first farmhouse he came to. The farmer who answered Tan's knocking slammed the door in the pilot's face after just one look to see who it was. He received a better response from the occupants of the next house he came across. A young couple helped arrange for Tan to be put up in a

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<sup>44</sup> Mackersey, *Into the Silk*, 80–81.



nearby house, hid his uniform and equipment, and provided him with a change of clothes. Unfortunately, his presence was eventually revealed to the local German authorities. He was arrested, just a few days after being shot down, and sent to the aircrew prisoner-of-war camp Stalag Luft III, in Lower Silesia on the Polish-German border. There he remained until sometime in early 1945. Amid the confusion in the relocation of prisoners as Soviet armies advanced towards the camp, several Allied prisoners-of-war were able to slip away. Tan, apparently, was one of them. We know that he probably escaped because the prisoners who were transferred to Stalag VII-A at Moosburg, Bavaria were only liberated by US forces on 29 April.<sup>45</sup> Yet his flying logs show that by 16 May 1945 he was already flying training missions once again in England, at RAF Fair Oaks.

Regardless of how and when he was able to leave Stalag Luft III, it is clear that Tan was eager to get back to flying. Germany had been defeated, and several Allied units were being transferred to Burma or the Pacific. The British harboured hopes of re-taking occupied Southeast Asia and avenging the humiliation inflicted on the empire by Japan's conquest of its colonies there. There was also the matter of the invasion of Japan, with the first stage planned for October 1945. Tan spent the European summer familiarising himself with the latest variant of the Spitfire (the Mk. IX), with his logs indicating that he was undergoing further training in air-to-air combat and dive-bombing. In all likelihood, it would appear that he was set to be transferred out of reconnaissance duties and into an attack squadron. He would never find out. Just before he received his new posting, the war came to a sudden end with the use of the atomic bomb on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August. Like so many others recruited through the Empire Air Training Scheme, Tan was enlisted in the RAF with a temporary commission, which meant that at the end of hostilities he was discharged of his duties and sent home to Singapore, with the King's gratitude.

Tan's dedication to the empire did not end with the conclusion of the war. In 1948, after completing a Diploma in Social Work in the University of London, he returned to Singapore, intending to embark in a career in social welfare. Within two years, he was flying in service of the empire once again. Tan was instrumental in the creation of the forerunner of

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<sup>45</sup> See A.P. Clark, *33 Months as a POW in Stalag Luft III: A World War II Airman tells his story* (Fulcrum Publishing: Golden, Colorado, 2005).



the Malaysian and Singapore Air Forces, the Malayan Auxiliary Air Force (MAAF). A decorated pilot, he was asked to train new pilots drawn from the colonial population for the MAAF in his capacity as Wing Commander. He was aide-de-camp to the Governor of Singapore Sir Ronald Black, and took part in government events either in ceremonies and parades or flying with other pilots of the MAAF, such as a fly past to mark the opening of Singapore's new airport in 1955.<sup>46</sup> His motivations over the years, he revealed to his son, had never wavered. British rule had made him what he was, and it was the imperial project that he believed in over all others, including Malaysian nationalism, especially amid the uncertainty of a Communist insurgency and Cold War politics.<sup>47</sup>

*Jimmy Chew*

Not all who felt the pull of serving the empire went overseas. As the cornerstone of imperial defence strategy for the Far East, Singapore was also one of the key nodes of the British Empire. As a maritime power, it was appropriate that the centrepiece of Britain's prized colony was a naval base, HMS *Sembawang*. It was the home of British Far East Command, which oversaw all naval defence matters in the colonies east of India, and had been completed in 1939 at a staggering cost of £60 million. It was designed to be fit for the most renowned navy in the world, containing the largest dry dock ever built, and stored enough fuel and ammunition to keep the whole of the Royal Navy supplied for six months. Even though the base would never see the great maritime fleet for which it was built, it served as a potent symbol of imperial power and prestige.

To protect the naval base, a string of coastal batteries that covered the approaches to the Straits of Johor north of the island as well as the colony's southern coastline were constructed, along with two airbases nearby—RAF Sembawang, and RAF Seletar, the latter being the headquarters of Air Force Far East Command. The makeup of the ground forces that were assembled to defend Singapore and its hinterland reflected the ability of the empire to draw on its human capital from across the world to secure its interests. Nearly one hundred and fifty thousand military personnel

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<sup>46</sup> *Straits Times*, 21 August 1955.

<sup>47</sup> Author's correspondence with Tan Thuan Seng, 7/2/2011.

from India, Australia, New Zealand, Scotland, Canada, and England were based in Malaya by the end of 1941.<sup>48</sup>

As was the case throughout the colonies, matters related to local defence were often outsourced to the resident non-white population when there were not enough Britons. In Malaya, the Compulsory Service (Volunteer Force) Ordinance was passed in June 1940 which empowered the colonial authorities to draft all men between the ages of 19 and 55 for defence training, creating a formal channel through which loyalty to the Crown could be demonstrated. Although in practice usually only European expatriates residing in the Straits Settlements and the Malay States (both Federated and Unfederated) were compelled to volunteer,<sup>49</sup> non-Europeans often did so as well. A civil defence organisation that was modelled on the British Home Guard was established on the eve of the Pacific War, employing around six thousand Air Raid Precautions (ARP) wardens recruited from the local Chinese, Indian, and Malay communities. A Malayan contingent of the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve of around four hundred European, Malay, and Chinese personnel was raised to crew minesweepers and patrol boats, and four Straits Settlements Volunteer Force infantry regiments were eventually created with a total strength of 2,841 men and women.<sup>50</sup>

The willingness to volunteer for the defence of the empire was a striking display of faith in the benefits, actual or perceived, that stemmed from continuous British colonial rule. Others saw formal service as the way forward, since it allowed one to wed an imperial calling with financial benefit, as the story of Jimmy Chew illustrates. Chew was born into a *peranakan* family in 1920, the second of eight children. As was often the case in Straits Chinese families, the household language was English and *Baba Malay*, rather than Chinese. The entire family conscientiously attended Anglican church services at St Andrew's Cathedral. Chew was brought up to think of himself as a British subject, and even as an adult he sang *God Save the King* at empire events with the utmost conviction. For him, there was no system or way of life that compared with British imperial rule and its ideals:

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<sup>48</sup> See B.P. Farrell, "Too Little, Too late: Preparing for War 1941–1942", in M.H. Murfett, J. Miksic, B. Farrell, and M.S. Chiang. *Between Two Oceans: A Military History of Singapore From First Settlement to Final British Withdrawal* (Oxford University Press: Singapore, 1999), 175–197.

<sup>49</sup> CO820/50.

<sup>50</sup> CO820/67.

That time, Britain is the best in the world. And we are lucky to be part of them. That is what my father taught me... At the time I was growing up, all I wanted to do is to see England myself. I was saving money so I can go [before war broke out]. But even many years later, I still feel then, I want to live in the UK or in Australia. These places feel more like they suit me.<sup>51</sup>

Jimmy Chew enlisted with the Royal Air Force as a technician in October 1940, and was posted to No. 151 Maintenance Unit at RAF Seletar upon the completion of his training. He was one of around eight hundred locals employed by the RAF for ground duties across Malaya's various air force stations.<sup>52</sup> For 51 Straits dollars a month, accommodation, and meals provided on camp, Chew performed a variety of repair and upkeep duties on Consolidated Aircraft PBY Catalina Flying Boats. His command of English was sufficient for him to communicate with British officers and other ranks, although he recalled that on more than one occasion he was told to "speak like an Englishmen, or find work elsewhere." While he often felt frustrated by the treatment he received, Chew recognised that the pecuniary benefits of his employment were just as important:

In Seletar there is a distinction. We are considered second-class servicemen. For example, for me, and one of my friend, in the weekend we thought we can go for a swim [in the base's public pool]. Before we could enter the water, a Service Policeman came along and said, hey, you cannot swim here. This is for British people only. We were so disciplined, and this is so normal those days, we didn't ask why. We just go away that's all... When I was in the service, I get this kind of distinction, I say to myself, what the heck I join the air force for? Huh? Why they treat me like this? So, but then, it's all forgotten [with time] A few days, I'm ok. Go back to work, it's a better life than many people have. How many people in Singapore earn \$51 a month?<sup>53</sup>

Jimmy Chew's world of permanence, and the financial benefit that stemmed from it, began to unravel in December 1941. The Japanese 25th Army's landing in southern Thailand and the town of Kota Bharu was followed by a swift and unrelenting advance down the Malay Peninsula. British, Indian, and Australian troops alike were left confounded as the Japanese circumnavigated fortifications and strongpoints by heading through the jungle (thought impassable by the defenders) and emerged behind them, threatening encirclement. A messy, panicked, and most-un-British retreat followed each time. Astute readers of Malayan dailies of

<sup>51</sup> Interview with Jimmy Chew dated 27/9/2001, Imperial War Museum, Asc No. 24222.

<sup>52</sup> See Bayly and Harper, *Forgotten Armies*, 60–69.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with Jimmy Chew dated 27/9/2001, Imperial War Museum, Asc No. 24222.

the day would have picked up on the disjuncture between news of heroic British victories with reports that indicated that a new battle was taking place further south than the previous one. On 10th December, the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, the last capital ships in the Pacific, were sunk by Japanese bombers off the east coast of the peninsula, having inflicted a loss of just three aircraft on their attackers. The sinking of the two vessels was a naval calamity of the greatest proportions not just for the Royal Navy's defence plans but also for British prestige, tied as the latter was historically to the navy's performance. The ease with which the Royal Navy's main strength in the Pacific had been sunk was redolent with political meaning, for even to contemporaries it heralded the end of an imperial system of defence that pledged its ability to defend Asia and Australia against threats to the empire's interests.<sup>54</sup>

On 31 January, the last British and Commonwealth troops retreated across the Straits of Johor to Singapore, and in doing so conceded the Malay Peninsula to the invaders. This had been a scenario envisaged in prewar planning. But the colony was supposed to have been able to hold out for at least six months while the Royal Navy put together a relief force to break the siege.<sup>55</sup> However, there was to be no reprieve for the defenders.

In preparation for their main assault, the Japanese began a week-long artillery and aerial bombardment of the island on 1 February, causing a breakdown in military and public order. Jimmy Chew and his comrades were dismissed from their duties at RAF Seletar by their superiors and told to fend for themselves. At this bleak moment, there was still an expectation that even if Singapore fell, it would shortly be under British rule again. Servicemen like Chew were therefore told to use the faith that ordinary civilians were presumed to still have in the empire's durability and longevity as collateral for rendering assistance:

We had to beg for advance pay when the Japanese surrounded Singapore! The British officers told us [before they left], look, you take care of yourselves. If you need food or help, go to any one of the shops or any family, tell them that you are British soldiers and that the government will thank them and pay them later on. And they will feed you and habilitate you. Wah! Singapore families is not like other countries. Even if they want, they

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<sup>54</sup> Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War*, 424.

<sup>55</sup> See M.H. Murfett, J. Miksic, B. Farrell, and M.S. Chiang. *Between Two Oceans: A Military History of Singapore From First Settlement to Final British Withdrawal* (Oxford University Press: Singapore, 1999).

just managed to cater for their own family. They don't have accommodation available to cater to us, or food, or medicine. So luckily, we can manage to sleep on the roadside.<sup>56</sup>

On 10 February, Chew and a group of stragglers from Seletar were making their way to the harbour ward on the southern end of the island when they were picked up by military police and sent to a staging area not far from the docks. The area was full of civilians and soldiers alike, all desperate to secure a place on the few remaining transports scheduled to depart. As trained aircraft technicians, the men from RAF Seletar were seen to have valuable skills that could be put to use elsewhere in the war. And so the group was approached by two British officers who asked for volunteers to travel by ship to Australia where they would be assigned to Royal Australian Air Force squadrons. It was not a difficult decision:

So I volunteered to join the draft to go to Australia. That's how I ended up in the Harbour Ward, and I left Singapore on the SS *Darbel*. Halfway, we left the evening of 13 February, and then in the morning, the early morning, about ten bombers overhead, they dropped bombs on us. They damaged the main steam pipe and then a few of us got killed. But however, we managed to reach Tanjung Priok the next day.<sup>57</sup>

The evacuees on the *Darbel* were fortunate in that it was one of the last ships to escape the doomed colony, but their respite was only temporary. Japan had already seized parts of the Dutch East Indies, and a general advance on Java was imminent. The defence of the island was haphazard at best, and suffered from the idiosyncrasies and politicking of a multinational coalition that had never been properly planned. An assortment of Dutch, American, British, and Australian formations were stitched together from everything ranging from professional Royal Netherlands Indies soldiers and civilian militia to the ragtag survivors of the Malayan campaign. But without a sufficient Allied maritime presence to defend the Indonesian archipelago, the outcome of the campaign was foregone.

A week after arriving in Tanjung Priok, Chew and the other RAF technicians were each given a rifle, some ammunition, and told that they were to be pressed into infantry duties against the advancing Japanese. But the haste in which they were needed also meant that there was not enough time to teach the technicians how to use the rifles. Even loading

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<sup>56</sup> Interview with Jimmy Chew dated 27/9/2001, Imperial War Museum, Asc No. 24222.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with Jimmy Chew dated 27/9/2001, Imperial War Museum, Asc No. 24222.

the ammunition into the weapon appeared to be difficult for Chew, let alone using it effectively. It did not matter. There was hardly a fight as the Japanese swept over their positions and captured the group on 8 March. They were sent to the main prisoner-of-war camp on the outskirts of Batavia, the General Dispatch Camp. There, and along with other colonial army enlistees, he found that from time-to-time he was singled out for beatings by camp guards for “betraying the skin” and actively supporting a system of imperial domination by whites over the population of Asia.<sup>58</sup>

When viewed through the prism of imperial diaspora and mobilisation, it is apparent that a war that was very different from the one that has been enshrined in the post-colonial nation’s story began in Malaya in September 1939. The empire was at the centre, while in the national narrative it is the post-colonial nation. And while the experiences detailed in this chapter have their limitations in that they are exceptional in proportion to the experiences of the majority, the presence of Malayan Chinese serving in imperial colours opens the door for us to consider the implications of their choices for historians.

Consideration of Malaya’s involvement in the European war of 1939 provides us with historical insight into life at the periphery of the British Empire for colonials who believed in, and were committed to, the imperial order. The empire was in a position to bring into play a vast array of resources from dominions and colonies that spanned the globe, and Malaya was a part of that mobilisation effort. Although the theatres of conflict were thousands of miles away, the imperial war was not at all foreign to a constituency of Chinese in Malaya for whom the British Empire was at the heart of their lives and ideological beliefs. These were certainly not bystanders to a conflict to which they had no connection, as the colonial view of the war has often claimed. The prestige, stability, and opportunity offered by the system formed the cornerstone of their existence, and they were part of a global community that responded when the empire was threatened.

In contrast to the way the Second World War is cast in Singapore’s national history, it was not the first act of a national creation story. Rather, it was fought in the interests of empire by those who had total belief in what empire stood for, and were willing to lay down their lives in its defence. Not everyone shared in the desire to seek war out, and both chance and adventurism played an undeniable part in driving those

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<sup>58</sup> Interview with Jimmy Chew dated 27/9/2001, Imperial War Museum, Asc No. 24222.

who did to battlefields overseas. But that was equally the case in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and other places across the empire where young men and women signed up, and so it should not dilute the significance of imperial ideology among the colonial citizenry in Malaya—a reality that has been marginalised in historical narratives of the post-colonial nation.





## CHAPTER SIX

### THE PACIFIC WAR

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941 marked the expansion of what was previously a conflict contained between two traditional enemies. It was an act that was in part borne out of the military government's frustration at the stalemate in China and the growing pressures placed on the Japanese war economy in the face of powerful American economic sanctions. There was a sense of bravado among some militarists as well, who felt that the United States could be defeated through innate advantages cultivated by centuries of Japanese martial tradition. Certainly the stunning success of the attack on the naval base at Pearl Harbour seemed to reinforce their sense of superiority. The United States had been caught off-guard, and as a result all of the capital ships of the U.S. Pacific Fleet were either sunk or badly damaged. A handful of aircraft carriers remained in operation, but in those early days of the Pacific War their strategic potential was not yet apparent to most.

The knockout blow dealt to the American naval forces left much of Asia vulnerable to Japanese expansion for months afterward. The war in Europe had transformed the French administration in Indochina into little more than a puppet regime, one that was propped up by Japanese goodwill in exchange for military access to air and naval bases throughout the colony. Britain's wider defence strategy for its Far East possessions relied heavily on an American presence in the Philippines as a deterrent to Japanese aggression, while similar hopes were held by the Dutch in the East Indies. The crippling of the one fleet in the region that was capable of doing battle on equal terms with the Japanese navy extinguished all hope that a force would be able and available to relieve beleaguered defenders as Japanese armies began to move on Southeast Asia.<sup>1</sup>

For Malayan Chinese especially, the Pacific War was a continuation of the Sino-Japanese conflict. As we saw in Chapter Four, the China diaspora had been at war for over four years by the time the attack on Pearl Harbour occurred. But for historians, having a Pacific Second World War

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<sup>1</sup> Farrell, B., "1941: An Overview", in B. Farrell & S. Hunter (Eds.), *Sixty Years On: The Fall of Singapore Revisited* (Oxford University Press: Singapore, 2002), 178–179.

frame distinct from the Sino-Japanese War is crucial. Firstly, the periodisation is significant, as the experiences in this new conflict began just as the Burma Road experiences drew to a close. Secondly, because the Japanese conquest of Southeast Asia ended the flow of volunteers leaving Singapore and the Malay states, the Pacific War was fought by Malayan Chinese who were already overseas at the time, and so it was experienced by a separate constituency to those who lived through the occupation.

More importantly, the entry of other powers into the conflict, especially the United States, necessitates a different frame to acknowledge the industrialisation of the war. Before, ad hoc arrangements were often what facilitated the movement of the China diaspora to sites of conflict. This was now replaced by a vast, complex production plan that was designed to draw in recruits from across disparate geographical regions, transport them to centralised instruction sites, and then systematically transform them into successive cohorts of military personnel. Hence, the Pacific War experience for individuals was one that was thematically characterised by mobility, of systematised, trans-national movement across thousands of miles into completely different worlds. It was markedly different to the relatively short distances involved in individual travel during the Sino-Japanese War, or the static-ness of the occupation experience. It was especially pertinent for those who volunteered to fly with Allied squadrons, as illustrated in the preceding chapter and again in a later section with the Chinese-American Composite Wing. In the case of the Composite Wing's pilots, the Malayan Chinese enlisted in China, were sent to India, before being shipped to the United States for training via the Indian Ocean, South Africa, and then the Atlantic. When their instruction was complete, they returned to China on a route that took them to the west coast of the United States, Australia, and India again. Such mobility is simply unheard of in Singapore's national war narrative.

### *From the Sino-Japanese War to the Pacific War*

The uneasy tranquillity that characterised the last days of peace was shattered as Japanese troops began systematically landing throughout much of Southeast and East Asia at about the same time as the attack on Pearl Harbour was underway. The tiny garrison in Hong Kong was overwhelmed in seventeen days, before the Japanese took the British surrender on Christmas Day at the Peninsula Hotel, one of the most iconic landmarks of colonial architecture in Asia. Imperial marines landed on the northern

island of Luzon in the Philippines while bombers from Formosa destroyed American aircraft in the US colony. Within six months, the entire archipelago would be under Japanese control. In Malaya, Japanese forces swept southwards with ease after landing in the northern coastal town of Kota Bharu. Singapore, their final target, fell after just seventy days. The government of Thailand was persuaded to grant military access to Japan in exchange for a promise to leave all other aspects of Thai sovereignty unmolested, and hence from mid-December onwards British Burma, too, came under attack by air and ground forces.

Like the Chinese government, Japanese military planners recognised the strategic value of the Burma Road in the China campaign. For nearly three years now, a steady supply of armaments and war material had flowed into Yunnan province through the road—a veritable lifeline for Nationalist armies. Much of it was destined to be pilfered or otherwise 'lost' as they were transported from the docks in Rangoon through to Lashio and then up the road to Kunming, but enough was getting through to keep sufficient KMT formations supplied to a point where Chinese troops were capable of forcing a deadlock with Japanese forces in the interior. China's armies were keeping thirty-six Japanese divisions and their supporting units—over a million troops, sailors, and airmen—occupied.<sup>2</sup> Put another way, this amounted to two-thirds of the Japanese army's total strength in 1941/42. These were military assets that were badly needed elsewhere on new war fronts across the Asia-Pacific region that had opened up. Three months after Pearl Harbour, the Japanese government transferred nine divisions from China to reinforce the troops already in Burma and the Philippines. More would have been sent, but planners in Tokyo feared a Chinese counter-offensive if the Japanese presence was depleted too greatly. They had good cause for concern. Shortly after the escalation of the conflict on 7 December, Chiang Kai Shek ordered his troops to begin a push towards the city of Guangzhou, with a view to relieving the besieged British and Commonwealth forces in Hong Kong. The Japanese regional commander was forced to divert sixty thousand troops to blunt this assault. The culmination of this offensive was a set-piece battle centring on the capital of Hunan province, Changsha. There, Japanese troops were badly defeated and forced into a general retreat after a month-long struggle.

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<sup>2</sup> J. Taylor, *The Generalissimo* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University press: Cambridge, Mass. and London, 2009), 189.

The victory at Changsha, which was the first Allied triumph since Pearl Harbour and came on the back of a morale-sapping succession of defeats across Asia and the Pacific, drove home an understanding among Allied leaders and planners that would not waver until the second half of 1944: the Sino-Japanese conflict appeared to have tremendous bearing on the long-term outcome of the Allied war against Japan, if for no reason other than the fact that Japan needed to commit the majority of its troops just to maintain a military impasse. The Allies thus had a strong motivation to keep China in the war as long as possible to pin Japanese military resources down, and perhaps even assist in turning the tide. The Japanese, too, were keenly aware that it was in their interest to end the war with China soon in their favour so that it could bring those troops to bear on campaigns elsewhere. The most realistic scenario they could hope for was to put enough military pressure on the Chongqing government that it would be forced into calling for a truce. Seizing control of the Burma Road, therefore, became a priority for Japanese strategists, and once military access had been granted by the Thai government late in the day on 8 December 1941, the Japanese 15th Army began fighting its way along the Kra Isthmus towards Rangoon.<sup>3</sup>

The escalation of the war in Asia meant that the conflict was no longer about “yellow man killing yellow man”, as it had been delicately framed by *Time Magazine* in late 1939,<sup>4</sup> and so it created a coalition of necessity centred on South Asia out of the United States, Great Britain, and the Republic of China. A Sino-Anglo-American alliance was one that had not been planned for until the last month of 1941. Before Pearl Harbour, the United States had engaged in some strategic planning with Britain and the Netherlands Indies government which centred on contingency plans in the event of war in Southeast Asia. No plans for a joint war effort with China existed, however. In fact, as late as June 1941 the Chief of the American Military Mission to China, Brigadier General John Magruder, had been instructed by the War Department not to engage in military planning and staff talks with Chinese army commanders in accordance with the official posture of neutrality adopted by the US in the Sino-Japanese War.<sup>5</sup>

It is perhaps then little surprise to note that it was China, and Chiang Kai Shek in particular, that leapt at the prospect of a formal alliance,

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<sup>3</sup> Taylor, *The Generalissimo*, 188–189.

<sup>4</sup> *Time*, October 1939.

<sup>5</sup> C.F. Romanus and R. Sunderland, *The History of the China-Burma-India Theater: Stilwell's Mission to China* (Department of the Army: Washington D.C., 1953), 50.

especially with the United States. Within hours of learning of the attack on Pearl Harbour, Chiang had drafted a letter to US President Franklin Roosevelt, which concluded on a powerful note:

To our new common battle we offer all we are and all we have, to stand with you until the Pacific and the world are free from the curse of brute force and endless perfidy.<sup>6</sup>

China, the United States, and Britain would all pledge that there would be no separate peace until all three Axis Powers were defeated. The Soviet Union declined entering the war in Asia in December 1941, preferring to concentrate its efforts on its troubled front with Germany. Stalin though assured the Nationalist government that, in due course, the USSR would join the Allies in the war against Japan.

### *The China-Burma-India Front*

The first order of business for the Allied forces in Asia was to stop the Japanese thrust through Southeast Asia. Of particular concern to the Chinese government was the rate at which Japanese forces were sweeping through Burma and towards the vital linkway. To establish some kind of military cohesion a new theatre of operations under a single supreme Allied command was created, the China-Burma-India (CBI) front. Unfortunately, on the global canvas of the Second World War where the Allies adopted a "Germany first" policy in guiding war strategy, the CBI front was a theatre that came last. Britain's war-making resources were already committed to the Home Islands, the Mediterranean, and North Africa, while the United States, bruised at Pearl Harbour, had not yet begun to tap into its massive industrial reserves that would swing the war so dramatically in favour of the Allies. Commanding the China-Burma-India front was, in US Army Chief-of-Staff George C. Marshall's words, "the most impossible job of the war",<sup>7</sup> referring to the fact that the Allied commander who oversaw the theatre would have to reconcile coming last in line for troops and equipment with the crucial job of defending both China and India.

To relieve the initial pressure on Burma, the Nationalist government offered several divisions of troops to bolster the collapsing British Commonwealth defences. However, differences between the highest echelons

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<sup>6</sup> Cited in Taylor, *The Generalissimo*, 188.

<sup>7</sup> Romanus and Sunderland, *The History of the China-Burma-India Theater*, 25–28.

of the British command and Chinese planners and the difficulty in coordinating a cohesive military response in the face of a rapid attack by Japanese formations combined to produce a thoroughly confused defensive rejoinder. The end result was that by the time the monsoon season began in May 1942 Allied forces had been forced to retreat back into India. The Burma Road was in the hands of the Japanese, a major blow to the Chinese war effort. But the wet weather had also turned the ground into mud and brought an abrupt end to any military initiative on both sides until the start of 1943. While the Japanese were poised on the Indian border and planned for a new offensive during the following year's fighting season, the Allies took the chance to reorganise and take stock of their losses.

There were some successes amid tales of defeat and retreat in Burma. In the skies over the British colony, a motley collection of aircraft and pilots known as the American Volunteer Group (AVG) had covered the Allied retreat with great gusto. Officially, the AVG was part of the Republic of China Air Force. In reality, it was a squadron populated by American pilots working on a contract of around US \$600 a month, plus bonuses for every Japanese aircraft shot down or destroyed on the ground.<sup>8</sup>

The AVG had its roots in a prewar initiative by the Nationalist government to establish flying schools to bring Chinese Air Force pilots up to date with modern combat piloting standards in the Western world. From the late 1920s onwards, enterprising Italian, French, German, British, and Soviet pilots—in some cases working for their respective states and in other cases working as independent contractors—had established a range of military flying schools across China. A small private Italian outfit for instance procured three older interwar bombers for use in instructing Chinese bombardiers. In a more formal arrangement, the Soviet Union had dispatched close to five hundred instructors who also later flew as volunteer combat pilots when war broke out, and twice that number of mechanics.<sup>9</sup>

Apart from just employing instructors and allowing flying schools to operate across parts of the country under its control, the Republic of China government also sought external advice on broader aviation policies. Through the influence of Chiang Kai Shek's wife, Soong Mayling

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<sup>8</sup> D. Ford, *Flying Tigers: Claire Chennault and his American Volunteers, 1941–1942*, rev. edn. (HarperCollins: New York, 2007), 13–15.

<sup>9</sup> See A.N. Young, *China and the Helping Hand, 1937–1945* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass., 1963), and A. Kalyagin, *Along Alien Roads* (Columbia University East Asian Institute: New York, 1983).

(who held the appointment of secretary-general in China's Aeronautical Commission), the Nationalist government contracted a retired US Army pilot, Claire Lee Chennault, in April 1937 to travel to China and conduct a survey of the Chinese Air Force over a three month period. In exchange for a salary of US \$1,000 per month, Chennault was asked to produce a report on the war readiness of the CAF at the end of his tour, as well as a series of recommendations that would form the basis through which the air force would be modernised.<sup>10</sup> Within weeks of Chennault's arrival in China, war broke out and he soon became Chiang Kai Shek's factotum on all matters related to military aviation.

To make up for the CAF's shortfall in quality and quantity at the start of the Sino-Japanese War, Chennault began recruiting pilots and ground crew from the United States to form a new combat squadron. With a comfortable monthly salary and the promise of adventure for soldiers of fortune, the recruitment drive was a success. On 2 August 1937, the *Washington Post* carried a report on one hundred and eighty-two American aviators and mechanics signing up for the job,<sup>11</sup> while the *Los Angeles Times* reported the following day that the Governor of California had moved to make future acts of "war recruiting" illegal.<sup>12</sup> When the Japanese government protested on the grounds that US support of such drives contradicted the United States' claim to neutrality in the conflict, Secretary of State Cordell Hull pushed through a policy in which the US government would refuse to issue passports to individuals who indicated that their purpose for travel was to serve in the military of a foreign state.<sup>13</sup>

As a workaround, some pilots crossed the border into Canada (where foreign military service was not prohibited) and departed for China from Vancouver. Others discreetly signed contracts to work for the ambiguously-named Central Aircraft Manufacturing Corporation (CAMCO), founded by the China sales representative of the aircraft manufacturer Curtiss-Wright, William Pawley. CAMCO was not just an arms firm, but also a front for the Chinese government's recruitment drive for foreign (and especially American) aviation personnel. The pilots who signed up through CAMCO were contracted to the company, but flew as part of the Chinese Air Force in a specific formation, the American Volunteer Group.

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<sup>10</sup> Ford, *Flying Tigers*, 10.

<sup>11</sup> *The Washington Post*, 2 August 1937.

<sup>12</sup> *The Los Angeles Times*, 3 August 1937.

<sup>13</sup> G. Xu, *War Wings: The United States and Chinese Military Aviation, 1929–1949* (Greenwood Press: Westport, Conn. and London, 2001), 153.



After the United States' entry into the war, the AVG became formally integrated into the Allied command structure in the China-Burma-India theatre. While American pilots and crew went to great lengths to sign up for the opportunity to fight in China for financial reward and adrenalin rushes, this initiative would also produce opportunities in military service for a group of Malayan Chinese.

### *Malayan Chinese and the Pacific War*

Not all overseas Chinese who ended up in service of the Allied forces in the war against Japan travelled from Malaya with the express purpose of going to war. Until 1956, when the first Chinese language university in Southeast Asia, Nanyang University, was opened, middle school graduates from the Nanyang region who sought a university education in Chinese needed to travel to China, with the most popular destinations for higher education were Beijing, Xiamen, and Hong Kong. This flow of tertiary aspirants from the diaspora back to China was a cultural rite of passage for the overseas Chinese who were able to afford the voyage and tuition, since it was the first time many of them were able to set foot in China and look upon a world that had only until then existed in bedtime stories and family histories.

Precisely how many Malayan Chinese travelled to China for university study is impossible to gauge empirically as the collective statistics simply do not exist. It is unlikely that there were huge numbers; the cost of studying was prohibitive for many, especially in the face of the relatively low wages earned by most Malayan Chinese. Anecdotal evidence though readily points to the fact that there were enough returning students to spawn small Malayan student enclaves in cities like Beijing and Hong Kong. What is also apparent is that the outbreak of war between China and Japan in 1937 and the fall of Hong Kong in 1941 left many students who were in the midst of their studies stranded. A few remained where they were, bravely trying to survive occupation by being inconspicuous. Others took flight amid air raids and sieges, making their way into the interior cities of Free China. There, cut-off from all communication with home and unable to know the fate of friends and loved ones, several tried to regain a sense of normalcy by continuing their university studies. Some, however, angered by displacement, uncertainty, and the horrors of racialised brutality, decided to take up arms in Chinese colours. One such individual was Ho Weng Toh. Excerpts from his interviews with the author of



this book, along with his personal flying logs, provide us with a powerful, detailed, and illuminating insight into overseas Chinese wartime experiences when also told on behalf of now-deceased Malayan Chinese who found themselves involved in the Pacific Second World War.

Born in 1921 to first generation Cantonese migrants from Guangdong, Ho was the first son among, eventually, eleven children. His father, Kok Lim, made a living peddling his shoe business on a bicycle to tin mines, rubber estates, and residences in the surrounding region, taking orders or collecting shoes in need of repair, and then bringing the footwear back out to estates when they were ready. Over time, Ho Kok Lim was able to rent a shop in Ipoh, which gave the family the ability to send the children to primary and middle school. As the oldest son, Ho Weng Toh was both privileged and subject to greater expectations. He was sent to an English mission school, St Michael's Institution, mainly for the perceived vocational benefits of English language acquisition, but the younger Ho was made to study Chinese after school instead of being allowed to play freely. The combination of strict regulation and being indulged produced a young man who blended intense discipline with a paradoxically wilful yearning for adventure.

The ideological setting of the Ho household was fairly typical of many *sinkeh* households in Malaya during the first half of the twentieth century. There was a firm recognition of the value of English language literacy in the face of the colonial system and, if financial circumstances permitted, a desire to ensure that one's children (or some of them, at least) had the opportunity to become literate in the language. And yet there was also a distinct identification with China as the cultural and political centre of life. In the case of the Ho household, it is worthwhile to note that not all of the children were sent to English schools, with several instead attending vernacular institutions. Ho Kok Lim, his son surmised several decades later in an interview, was being careful not to put "all his eggs in one basket."<sup>14</sup> The elder Ho's hope was that his son would grow up to successfully draw economic and cultural advantages from the diasporic and colonial worlds that the family simultaneously straddled: literate in English and hence able to plug into the economic opportunities offered by the imperial world system, and yet comfortable with his Chinese heritage. Indeed, Ho Weng Toh was brought up to revere Confucius and Sun Yat Sen.

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<sup>14</sup> Author's interview with Ho Weng Toh, 6/9/2008.

Each figure represented a distinct pillar, the former moral and the latter political, which informed the household's identification with China. Confucian tenets formed the moral and structural framework for how the household operated, while Sun was the conduit through which political awareness and nationalism were introduced into the Ho family. As Ho recalled in an interview:

My father was a great [Chinese] chauvinist, firstly because of Confucius, and secondly because of Sun Yat Sen... he was very with it... Sun Yat Sen got Chinese some status [after the revolution]. All these sort of things were a little bit political, and yet came into being in our life. That's why when you ask me about China's history, that's how I know. My father told me all about it. Most people didn't know about why China and Japan had a lot of hatred for each other even before 1933 (sic). But I know... all this sort of history, I knew it long ago, maybe 12 years old. So when I grew up, I was very much into it... I was in an English school, but my father made sure I had Chinese roots.<sup>15</sup>

After completing his Senior Cambridge exams, Ho was given the opportunity to pursue tertiary studies in Hong Kong. While his immediate family was unable to afford the tuition and cost of living overseas, his uncle—a wealthy tin entrepreneur—agreed to sponsor his studies. In mid-1939, Ho left for Hong Kong to study engineering at Lingnan University. There, he found that he struggled with the language of instruction. Even with his background of studying Chinese at home, Ho found it difficult to follow lectures delivered by thickly-accented mainland Chinese instructors. Depressed at how difficult he was finding things, he sought to improve his comprehension by enrolling in a Chinese language class for Overseas Chinese students. It was there that he met over a dozen others from Malaya. Firm friendships naturally emerged.

The following year, Ho's spirits improved even further when, on a visit back home, he managed to convince his childhood friend Leong Ming Sen to join him in Hong Kong. The grandson of a tin mining tycoon in the Malay state of Perak, Leong's family found it easy to afford to send him overseas to attend university. In the autumn of 1940, he too enrolled at Lingnan, but chose to study economics instead. For a time, the Malayan Chinese group enjoyed everything that came with university life in the vibrant Crown Colony. But they were far from oblivious to the nature of the conflict that was violently unfolding across the border from the British

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<sup>15</sup> Author's interview with Ho Weng Toh, 6/9/2008.

colony. Protests against Japanese aggression filled squares and streets on any given day, while a relentless procession of Chinese political dignitaries delivered impassioned speeches to raise funds, sell war bonds, and issue calls for volunteers. Unsurprisingly, Ho, Leong, and their compatriots were caught up in this excitable and charged atmosphere:

Hong Kong being close to China, there were a lot of anti-Japanese movements going on. In fact, I even met Madame Sun Yat Sen once. Because they were very close, they come down to raise funds. It's very easy, all the big dignitaries from the KMT came down, because they had a lot of family and ties in Hong Kong. So eventually they come down, they publish and come and raise funds, you can see them, all the big Chinese politicians. I took it (seeing well-known Chinese political figures) for granted, not like Malaysia, no one famous went there. And of course those days, the colonial years, the British government never allowed them to go to Malaysia and campaign. But Hong Kong, because it is so close to China, the British had to let it happen. You cannot stop that sort of thing. A lot of Chinese would be upset if they suppress it... so we went to see as many of them talk as we can.<sup>16</sup>

Ho was in his third year and had transferred to Hong Kong University when the Sino-Japanese War became the Pacific War. There had been rumours of impending war in the months leading up to the end of 1941. More sandbag defences, machinegun posts, and anti-aircraft guns began to appear across Hong Kong Island and Kowloon, and every so often air raid drills were conducted while British Vickers Vildebeest biplanes made a show of roaring overhead from Kai Tak airport. But the prospect of invasion was often dismissed by more optimistic students and faculty who believed that the Japanese would not dare attack a possession of the British Empire, and certainly not while the war with China remained unresolved. But on 8 December, while the US Pacific fleet burned at anchor in Hawaii, elements of the Japanese 23rd Army in Guangdong province crossed the Chinese border into the colony. At the same time, Japanese aircraft began systematically attacking the transportation infrastructure, as Ho Weng Toh recalled:

I was studying for the exam, and then suddenly at the balcony of my hostel I heard explosions and sirens. So I went out to look. They were bombing the airport, Kai Tak, I saw aircraft flying around, dropping bombs. I went into my room, and then I heard on the radio the news that the war was on. Japan attacked Hong Kong, attacked Pearl Harbour, war was on. I was only 20 years old. The whole mentality of mine changed, you know. I stood

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<sup>16</sup> Author's interview with Ho Weng Toh, 6/9/2008.

there, dumbfounded. Where do I go from here? There was a big mixture of ideas that came through my mind. Everything felt lost. Then I composed myself. . . . and with some friends, among us, we thought, let's see what the authorities say, and what we can do to get away. . . . Eventually, I thought, no point going back to Malaysia, we must go to China. We had to take a chance.<sup>17</sup>

While pilots in unarmed commercial transports from the China National Aviation Corporation (CNAC) braved Japanese fighter planes and shuttled in and out of Kai Tak, ferrying notables in Hong Kong like Madame Sun and H.H. Kung to Chongqing, the general population had little avenue for escape. There were only enough places in the commercial transports for a select few, and the landward route into Guangdong was blocked by advancing troops. No sea evacuation was possible due to a lack of passenger ships available, and at any rate the harbour was being shelled and bombed relentlessly by Japanese artillery and aircraft.<sup>18</sup> Ho and his fellow students were forced to seek shelter during the assault on the colony, before making their way out first by truck then by boat when the fighting stopped after the British Commonwealth defenders finally surrendered on Christmas Day. During the chaos of invasion and occupation, Ho became separated from a number of his compatriots, Leong Ming Sen among them.

Fate would send both Ho and Leong on separate journeys to a common destination. The former made his way through the cities of Guizhou and Kukong, eventually arriving in Guilin in August 1942. There, like so many student refugees who found their studies disrupted by war he attempted to complete his degree, this time at Sun Yat Sen University. With Malaya now under Japanese occupation and with no means of communicating with family members back home, Ho found himself cut off from his uncle's financial support. Desperate for work to support his studies, he took to reading local newspapers religiously, hoping for employment opportunities that would provide some income. It did not take a particularly astute reader to notice a growing and distinct recruitment trend in the papers:

At the time, China needed a lot of pilots. So, in Guilin, after a while I started to notice all of the advertisements in newspapers to recruit people, and especially those that were looking for pilots. A lot of boys, like me from Malaysia and Singapore, wanted to join the air force. But the medical was very strict and the failing rate was very high. I didn't think I would get into

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<sup>17</sup> Author's interview with Ho Weng Toh, 6/9/2008.

<sup>18</sup> P. Snow, *The Fall of Hong Kong: Britain, China and the Japanese occupation* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2004), 70.

the air force, because I was not very tall, not big, or athletic. But I very badly wanted to do something for China. Luckily, the doctor who was examining me was willing to overlook some of the guidelines. And because of that, I got in. I was lucky.<sup>19</sup>

Lucky may not have been the best word to describe one's fate when one was admitted into the pilot program, considering the casualty rates of flyers from a variety of causes—anti-aircraft artillery, enemy fighter planes, weather and terrain, or navigational challenges—on the China-Burma-India Front. But Ho got exactly what he wanted when he passed the medical and written examination for combat service in the Chinese Air Force.

Others who failed the exams were instead recruited by the CNAC. The airline was technically a civilian corporation, although it operated under the direction of the War Ministry and its pilots were under that ministry's control. But because of its civilian and commercial heritage, the CNAC had less stringent physical requirements for entry into their flying programs. With the Japanese threatening to overrun the Burma Road, an alternative strategy to ensure that the Nationalist armies remained supplied was being drawn up in Chongqing. This was a plan that necessitated the rapid expansion of the CNAC's pool of available pilots and flying crew, as we shall see later in this chapter. Ho, who would also come to work closely with the CNAC later in the war, noted the presence of a number of Malayan Chinese who ended up in the airline in this manner:

Some others went to do other things, and others did not go into combat flying. They became commercial pilots instead to fly the Hump, from Kunming to Assam. Around 20 of them were singled out by the airline because they were desperate for pilots. These were people who were enlisted and trained as crew. But when they found that some of them are suitable to be pilots, they sent them to Calcutta to be trained. So apart from the combat pilots like me, we have those people too from Malaysia and Singapore.<sup>20</sup>

While Ho was being selected for further assessment on his aptitude for combat flight, Leong Ming Sen had made his way separately with another group of Malayan Chinese university students to Chengdu, the provincial capital of Sichuan, by mid-1942. There, driven by a powerful sense of helplessness that built up each time he found himself unable to help casualties of war he came across, he decided to study medicine instead at the West China Union University. But within months, the pull of patriotic

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<sup>19</sup> Author's interview with Ho Weng Toh, 6/9/2008.

<sup>20</sup> Author's interview with Ho Weng Toh, 6/9/2008.

adventure led Leong to respond to one of the pilot recruitment calls. He narrowly failed the medical examination for combat flight, a disappointing surprise given his natural athleticism at school, but he was instead funnelled into the CNAC's commercial flying program.<sup>21</sup> By the end of the year, he was a pilot trainee in the airline, flying training aircraft out of Calcutta.

India was the Allied staging ground for initial training of both commercial and combat aviators in the CBI theatre. Those selected for combat roles in the Chinese Air Force were eventually sent to the United States for more rigorous training. Along with around three hundred other Chinese, Ho found himself in Lahore, capital of the province of Punjab. There, they undertook flying tests by the beginning of 1943, culminating in evaluated solo flights in a biplane. A third of the batch failed, and the 'washouts' were sent to the CNAC to be trained as commercial aircrew. The hundred and eighty trainees who passed were sent via train to Bombay. From there, a Liberty ship ferried them through Cape Town in South Africa, then across the Atlantic to New York.

Even though the ships that he travelled on never came under attack by Japanese or German submarines, for Ho the sea passages from Bombay to New York, and then, later, from Long Beach to Calcutta provided some of the most powerful memories of the Second World War. The voyages took around three months in total, with the slow-moving convoys passing close to occupied territory or known submarine hunting grounds, and the complete inability to do anything but hope that the ship would not be torpedoed by a stalking submersible meant that nerves were always on edge as individuals were gripped by a collective sense of dread at a menace that was invisible to them. As Ho Weng Toh described in an interview:

Think about that . . . by boat, from Bombay to New York! That's the time the German U-boats were at its height . . . And I was on this crazy boat. The first port of call was Cape Town. I was with 180 Chinese trainee pilots on board. The bloody voyage took 3 months, frightening you know! Coming back [to China], it was even worst still. From Long Beach, Los Angeles, all the way to Melbourne. Look at the map! Next one is Calcutta. We had to pass through the Bay of Bengal. By this time the Japanese took over everything, Burma, Indonesia, everything belonged to them. Again, on this crazy boat, this Liberty Ship. They loaded the whole boat with ammunition and equipment. Right on top they put this P-51 Mustang. Imagine that! From far, far away,

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<sup>21</sup> Author's correspondence with Leong Ming Sen, 8/2/2007.

the Japanese would know who we were, then [they were] sure to torpedo you, make sure you don't get to your port. Some mornings you get up and go on deck, you see debris everywhere. Leftovers of ships that sunk. It was the scariest part of the war for me, worse than even flying.<sup>22</sup>

After arriving in New York, the cadet pilots were sent to Arizona by train. For most, it was a trip that was both exciting and luxurious. The trans-continental passenger trains that operated in the United States were nothing like those that were in use in China, or even in India. "We travelled in style", Ho recalled, and he passed the hours admiring the picturesque landscape that flashed by outside their windows as the train meandered its way down the eastern seaboard and then across the southern states. Bustling towns gave way to well-manicured estates, until the desert became the dominant setting. Eventually, the group arrived at their destination:

Our first base was a place called Chandler. We used the trainers there for pre-flight education . . . three months. I was among about maybe twenty who speak English, most of us from Malaya. The rest were Chinamen, can't speak English. The main thing we had to do was orientation. The Americans didn't know anything about the China Air Force, and we didn't know anything about the American air force. So they said, okay, we make sure you guys settle down before you start flying. Get to know what is to be expected, the classes, the program, the language, the living, that sort of thing.<sup>23</sup>

After a period of orientation at Chandler, where the trainees were also given the opportunity to mix with and get to know American and Canadian pilot cadets, the entire group was moved to Glendale where they were put through primary flying training. There, all trainees needed to accumulate sixty-five hours of flight time, after which they undertook a challenging test that was designed to ruthlessly cull the cohort, leaving only those with the highest levels of flying aptitude. A fifth of the class would not qualify. Those who made the cut were next sent to another airbase, this time near the city of Tucson. Those who did not pass their primaries remained at Glendale to be trained as navigators, bombardiers, and wireless operators.

At Tucson, the trainees moved up to the next phase of pilot training, Basic. Here, they clocked up another sixty-five hours of flying time, and undertook another test. Selection was less brutal by this time, with only a mandated 10 per cent failure rate. By now, the initial group of one hundred

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<sup>22</sup> Author's interview with Ho Weng Toh, 6/9/2008.

<sup>23</sup> Author's interview with Ho Weng Toh, 6/9/2008.



and eighty Chinese pilots was reduced to two-thirds that number, including Ho. These were sent on to Douglas for advanced flight training. Ho's cohort attained their flying wings and graduated in April 1944, but not before Yow Siew Wah, a fighter pilot trainee from Ipoh, came first in a gunnery competition organised among the cadets.<sup>24</sup>

Ho was an individual who identified clearly with China along cultural and political lines. Fate and a capacity for adventure had set him on the path that he now found himself on, but it was clear both then and in retrospect that he had made a decision to contribute to the China cause, and saw flying as the best means of fulfilling his goal. As he recalled:

Our priority was to fight a war, for China. To save China. Even when we were in Arizona, we could hardly wait to come back and fight a war. Many of us said, don't make me stay back to be an instructor... In such a short time, I went from being a civilian to an officer, I learned all those things... I felt so proud, when we went back to the US [after the war as part of the victory celebrations] we marched and also we sing, so loud, so impressive, everyone stopped to look at us. To see who we were... Back then, I was very proud of the KMT. Any ceremony, you know, we could give them a show. We carried the [Republic of China] flag, and we gave the China armed forces a lot of dignity. After so long, when China had no pride, now we had pride. We flew alongside Americans, and we beat the Japanese.<sup>25</sup>

For someone who had oriented himself so dramatically towards Nationalist China, Ho found the United States to be "a honeymoon." His familiarity with the English language gave him a sense of comfort and confidence in an otherwise foreign land, so much so that he found himself genuinely thrilled to be in the country. Cultural practices and consumer goods that might have intimidated or shocked others were already familiar to him through American movies and books. Along with other Malayan Chinese who were effectively bilingual, he became a de facto spokesperson and principal for the Chinese pilots not just in the US, but at ports-of-call on the sea voyages to and from America:

I speak English, I know the American way of life. For me, when I was young I already watched movies, Ginger Rogers and all [the things that contributed to the] American way of life, so it was nothing, like heaven. For those Chinese people, no. The Chinese people, many of them never saw the ocean or the sea before. All those sort of things seemed very strange for them, and they took a hell of a long time to get adjusted. During my voyage [at sea],

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<sup>24</sup> Author's interview with Ho Weng Toh, 6/9/2008.

<sup>25</sup> Author's interview with Ho Weng Toh, 6/9/2008.



I have to become the leader of even the Chinese people. Because I have to, I speak English. Even in places like Cape Town, Melbourne, people were saying, Winkie ah, I want to be with you! Because they know I know how to get along, with English. And so I became very popular.<sup>26</sup>

### *The Chinese-American Composite Wing*

After graduation, the newly-qualified pilots were sent to Colorado. There, they joined up with the cadets who had been sifted out at Glendale and Tucson, and had been since re-trained. It was now apparent to all that they were being prepared for bombing roles in a twin-engine medium bomber that was a ubiquitous presence across Allied air forces in all theatres of war, the North American Aviation B-25 "Mitchell". For weeks, until the end of summer, the crews familiarised themselves with the B-25, performing mock strafing runs, learning to fly in close formation, and learning the aerodynamic characteristics of the aircraft. In August, with the tide of the war clearly against the Axis, the group was ordered to pack up and prepare for the return voyage to China. There they would join an Allied initiative that had emerged as a legacy of the AVG, the Chinese-American Composite Wing (CACW).

The CACW had been formed on 1 October 1943 as a wing of the United States Army Fourteenth Air Force. In Chinese popular writing and media reports, the Composite Wing were, and continue to be, referred to as 'Flying Tigers'—the nickname given to the American Volunteer Group by the Chinese press in the early stages of the conflict. Given that each organisation was considerably different from the other both in terms of structure and command as well as the reason for each one's existence, this was an erroneous reporting practice as it set up the CACW as merely a formalisation of the voluntary (or mercenary, if one were blunt) nature of the AVG.

In reality, how and why the AVG metamorphosed into the Composite Wing was far more complex and exhaustively covered elsewhere by others,<sup>27</sup> but there is some veracity to the claim. The geographical ambit of the CACW's operations was comparable to that of the AVG, the wing's American pilot roster included a number of veterans from the AVG, and squadrons were populated by both US and Chinese flying personnel and ground crew, as had been the case with the AVG. Perhaps most

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<sup>26</sup> Author's interview with Ho Weng Toh, 6/9/2008.

<sup>27</sup> See for instance Ford, *Flying Tigers*.

importantly of all, the unit came under the command of Claire Chennault, by this time a Major-General. Chennault's crusty attitude and carefully-sculpted image as an irrepressible, roguish veteran who had recognised and taken the fight to the enemy long before Pearl Harbour made him a powerful symbolic figure in press coverage of the Composite Wing. Cast in that light he was when he was featured on the covers of *Life* and *Time* magazines in August 1942 and December 1943 respectively.<sup>28</sup> In both, he was described as endearingly "gruff" and "stubborn", a grizzled ace that refused to recognise the impossible odds he faced against the Japanese in China.

The organisation of the Composite Wing was modelled along the lines of a standard flying wing in a United States Army Air Force. The wing was made up of four groups, designated fighter groups (which operated single pilot fighter aircraft such as the P-40 and, later, the P-51) and bomber groups (which primarily utilised the six-man B-25s). Each group consisted of four squadrons, and each squadron was made up of eight to ten aircraft. On paper, therefore, the Composite Wing's strength stood close to one hundred and sixty aircraft, although in reality the attrition of aircraft through combat and mechanical failure (exacerbated by the remoteness of their bases and the difficulty in obtaining spare parts as a result) reduced the number of aircraft available at any given time.

The deliberate mixing of nationalities among the wing's air and ground crew made it distinct among Allied formations. Nominally a unit within the Chinese Air Force, the philosophy behind the Composite Wing was to have Americans and Chinese (both from China and those from overseas communities) work side-by-side. American crew assigned to the wing were listed as enlisted men in the Republic of China Air Force. As a public relations opportunity, it was a popular example of Allied unity in the war against Japan. On a political level however, as the discussion earlier in this chapter has demonstrated, the Composite Wing was the natural outcome of a longer history of aviation assistance received from the United States by Chiang Kai Shek's government.

Everyday life as a member of the wing brought many opportunities for close relationships to form across nationalities and languages. But set against the canvas of an alliance of necessity against a common enemy and marked by a lack of tools to facilitate cultural understanding or tolerance, unsurprisingly the Composite Wing produced an idiosyncratic

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<sup>28</sup> See *Life*, 10 August 1942; and *Time*, 6 December 1943.

community. American and Chinese crew had their own compounds, and during the downtime between missions often kept to themselves.<sup>29</sup> Cliques were a fact of life, such as the Cantonese clique that Ho belonged to, and a variety of American cliques also emerged around state affiliation, or the length of service in China.

Some falling-outs stemmed from unequal power relations between the US and China. Chinese pilots often flew as co-pilots to lower-ranked American pilots, and some senior Chinese flight officers found this arrangement insulting. American crew also felt that since the United States had provided their training and equipment, the least the Chinese could do so was to learn the language, and this was viewed by the latter as an arrogant assumption. Other misunderstandings were inevitable outcomes of cross-cultural encounters. Ken Daniels, who flew as a Crew Chief with the CACW's 1st Bomb Group, writes in his memoirs *China Bombers* that most of the Americans in the wing were young men "who left schools and farms, [and] had been hurled into the alien culture of a foreign land." Just before US crew arrived in Bombay, they were handed a pocket-sized orientation book to familiarise themselves with India and its cultures. It would have been somewhat more useful, Daniels notes, for them to have received some reading material about China.<sup>30</sup> Yet these divides seldom resulted in hostility or even friction. Racist assumptions about each other were commonplace, but by all accounts relationships between American and Chinese pilots were genuinely warm and supportive. Ho formed close friendships with US pilots that lasted for decades after the war, and similar stories are apparent in oral testimonies provided by other Chinese pilots, and in memoirs by American crew.<sup>31</sup>

Whilst on military operations, the practice of blending nationalities occurred in one of two ways. One was to crew a B-25 with both Chinese and Americans, and the other was to have distinct American-crewed and Chinese-crewed bombers fly together. The language barrier, an annoyance on the ground, was frustrating and dangerous in the air. Few of the Americans spoke any Mandarin beyond rudimentary words. Many of the Chinese crew spoke in their own dialect anyway, "as many subtle Chinese

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<sup>29</sup> K. Daniels, *China Bomber: The Chinese-American Composite Wing in World War II* (Speciality Press: North Branch, MN, 1998), 12.

<sup>30</sup> Daniels, *China Bomber*, 11.

<sup>31</sup> Author's interview with Ho Weng Toh, 6/9/2008; and transcripts of interviews with George Ma and Roland Hsu provided by the Society of Oral History on Modern China; and Daniels, *China Bomber*.

dialects as there were words”, as Ken Daniels recalled, and so being accomplished in Mandarin was only of limited value in breaking down misunderstandings.<sup>32</sup> The Chinese pilots had been given a crash course in English during their time in Arizona, but it was a tough call to expect confident mastery in vocabulary, pronunciation, and enunciation in such a short period of time. Misunderstandings were therefore commonplace, and on mixed crew flights the pilots of the Composite Wing acted out “a form of pig Latin, graces with gestures. This narrowed the gulf until some urgency arose and everyone reverted, in pandemonium, to native tongue.”<sup>33</sup> In this environment, individuals who were multilingual like Ho Weng Toh were popular because of their ability to act as interpreters on a bomber.

Ho Weng Toh arrived back in China in late 1944 after a tense but ultimately uneventful passage by ship, and found himself posted to the 1st Bomb Group, based near the city of Hanzhong in Shanxi Province. The desire to go into action right away was difficult to contain as the pilots checked, then double-checked, to see if their names appeared on the bulletin for the next day’s missions:

After dinner, every evening, we rushed to see if our name was up on the roster. During dinner, we couldn’t focus on eating. That’s all we cared about. We just wanted to go on a mission . . . When our name was not up [on the roster], then we just helped out buddies prepare for the flight. There are a lot of things to get ready before a mission, like aircraft preparation, safety checks, the equipment, those that didn’t fly helped to prepare.<sup>34</sup>

Ho did not have to wait long before he was sent out on his first mission in February 1945, as a co-pilot to a more senior and experienced American flyer. The sortie was undertaken by just a pair of B-25s to track enemy deployments a short distance away. Years later, Ho distinctly remembered the excitement he felt in the lead-up to his first combat flight over China, as well as the silent disappointment he felt as the aircraft turned for home, objectives achieved. As it transpired, Ho’s first was an uneventful reconnaissance mission and while he saw Japanese troops and evidence of their activities, the bombers were not allowed to attack. Nor did the Japanese seem to be interested in shooting at the two aircraft that day.

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<sup>32</sup> Daniels, *China Bomber*, 11.

<sup>33</sup> Daniels, *China Bomber*, 11–12.

<sup>34</sup> Author’s interview with Ho Weng Toh, 6/9/2008.

After a matter of days, however, Ho went into action on his second mission. It was one that was memorable for the adrenalin of combat, and for the fact that he finally had the opportunity to exact a toll on the Japanese for their brutal conduct of the war, as he explained in an interview:

The second mission, that was a strafing mission. The real thing, two aircraft. Low, low level, in February 1945. We went through one round, and on the second pass we really opened up on them [with cannon and machine-guns]. I could see them all running on the ground, they tried to disperse, and they were in panic under this sort of attack, out of the blue. And I told myself, every time I opened up, this is for all the things I've been looking forward to. This gave me a lot of joy. Even though it was cruel, even though it was killing, you know, this is war. And we waited so long to fight against the Japanese, and after so many years of uncertainty as a student refugee traveling here and there. For me, it was total satisfaction on both passes... Even you're asking me now, I will never say I regretted doing it. No way. At the time, I felt they deserved it, the enemy.<sup>35</sup>

Operating from forward air bases in south-western and central China, the Composite Wing's primary role was to provide both strategic and close air support to Allied operations across the China-Burma-India theatre. Its aircraft protected the northern end of the Hump aerial supply route while supporting ground offensives by Chinese ground forces directly through attacks on Japanese troops, or by destroying enemy aircraft and airfields. On other occasions, the CACW was called on to attack bridges, rail lines, locomotives, and boxcars to hinder the flow of Japanese reinforcements and supplies.

Ho's missions came and went quickly. A number of them involved attacking a crucial bridge that spanned two banks of the Yellow River near the capital of Shanxi province, Xian. It was well-defended by anti-aircraft artillery, and its narrow profile made for a particularly difficult target to hit. Time and time again, the CACW launched attacks at it, at a great cost of life as Ho remembered:

In the Yellow River, near Xian, there was a very important bridge. The Japanese moved a lot of troops, ammunition, and goods over the bridge. So, very quickly, that became our most important target. But because of that, they also knew we flew over all the time. And so they fortified themselves, and they did a damned good job because they leave very little way for us to come in and go out [of the area] easily. They hid big guns in the forest, under the bridge, and they studied our flight path, and they knew very well the

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<sup>35</sup> Author's interview with Ho Weng Toh, 6/9/2008.

angle we were coming from to try and bomb the bridge. And we can't help it, we need to go low. Too high, and you can't be accurate. We flew above the tree-tops. That's where we lost many of our people. I was lucky when I joined the CACW, most of the danger was from the ground, flak, you know. First few years, it was very hot, the Japanese planes came all the time. But even later on, it was very risky. Many people died. Every time you come back, your aircraft will have a lot of flaks. A lot of hits.<sup>36</sup>

As 1945 progressed, worthwhile land-based targets were few and far between, and so the CACW was directed to attack Japanese merchant shipping along major inland rivers and off the coast of China.<sup>37</sup> Usually operating without naval escorts, the ease in which such vessels were destroyed belied their importance to the Japanese war effort, which by now had been crippled by a lack of supplies due to the vast tonnage of merchant shipping being sunk by Allied forces from 1943 onwards, which amounted to some five million tons, or over a thousand ships.<sup>38</sup> The CACW's contribution to this interdiction effort amounted to over six thousand tons of merchant shipping sunk in the final six months of the war.<sup>39</sup> This role was a noteworthy success despite the disparity between the total and contributed figures of tonnage sunk for two reasons. Firstly, most of the Allied success against Japanese shipping was achieved in 1943 and 1944; by 1945, the campaign had greatly reduced the size of Japan's merchant fleet, and with the shipbuilding industry unable to adequately replace losses of such a scale there were simply fewer targets out at sea. Secondly, the bomber crews of the CACW had never been formally trained in attacking ships under full steam and attempting evasive manoeuvres in the open sea. This new kind of quarry required a set of skills and knowledge quite different from that needed to attack ground-based targets, and for newcomers to a field who were 'learning on the job', so to speak, the results of the CACW were admirable.

Death came through sudden violence, but the end was not always quick for the unfortunate. An unlucky hit from Japanese anti-aircraft guns could sever a plane's control columns, cut the body of the aircraft into two, or destroy the cockpit, leaving the aircraft spiralling wildly out of control into a mountain or the ground. Other crew met speedier ends when

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<sup>36</sup> Author's interview with Ho Weng Toh, 6/9/2008.

<sup>37</sup> Xu, *War Wings*, 168.

<sup>38</sup> See D. Evans & M. Peattie, *Kaigun: strategy, tactics, and technology in the Imperial Japanese Navy* (Naval Institute Press: Annapolis, Maryland, 1997).

<sup>39</sup> Xu, *War Wings*, 168.

Japanese gunners scored a direct hit on the fuel tank, or when a fatigued pilot and co-pilot misjudged a landing. Between its formation in October 1943 and the end of the war in August 1945, the CACW lost over two hundred aircraft to enemy action and accidents.<sup>40</sup> Friends were lost faster than they were made. For Ho, a philosophical view toward life, coupled with distracting conversations, were essential for one's sanity:

These (the death of friends) are the things you have to accept... You cannot keep brooding over these things, and rewinding our memories, it's not a good thing. We call it, the war must go on. The mission must go on. I think, in those days, diversion was also not too many. Our [base] facilities were limited. We used to play a bit of tennis, but all the nets were full of holes, the balls are balding, that sort of thing. And we watched some movies too. Most of the time, we distracted ourselves by talking. We exchange our lives, with Americans, because I was lucky I got along with them, and the Taiwan boys. I made some very good friends. Even today, they are all still very important to me.<sup>41</sup>

### *The Hump Route*

Leong Ming Sen, in the meantime, had completed his training with the CNAC and was sent to the northern Indian province of Assam where he began piloting air transports from India into Yunnan in January 1944. There, along with thousands of other Allied pilots, he became part of an ongoing initiative designed to keep China in the war beyond the closure of the Burma Road. This was an Allied aerial supply operation over the Himalayas that, for three years, involved a massive fleet of slow, unarmed, and ungainly cargo planes flying through treacherous weather conditions with navigational instruments and maps that were hopelessly inadequate for the task.

From early 1941, the Nationalist government instructed the CNAC to conduct a series of exploratory flights across the Himalayas to map suitable routes for transport aircraft shuttling between southwest China and northeast India. Two successful paths, one a lower, indirect path through northern Burma and the other a higher and more direct path from Chabrua in the Assam Valley cutting across the lower ridges of the Himalayas into Kunming, were officially documented a fortnight before Pearl Harbour. Following the outbreak of war in the Pacific, when the port

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<sup>40</sup> *The China White Paper* (Stanford University Press: Stanford, California, 1967), 28–29.

<sup>41</sup> Author's interview with Ho Weng Toh, 6/9/2008.



of Rangoon came under imminent threat by advancing Japanese forces in February 1942, the President of the United States Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered the elements of the United States Army Air Force present in the China-Burma-India Front, then organised as the Tenth Air Force, to begin undertaking missions to supply Chinese forces by air along the Himalayan routes. On 3 March, the First Ferrying Group (operating under the American Ferry Command) commenced regular flights from Chabrua, delivering gasoline and other critical war supplies to Kunming. But with only three squadrons totalling twenty-five C-47 transports the Ferrying Group could only deliver some six hundred tons in its first month of sorties, a nearly negligible amount compared to the nearly twenty thousand tons being sent across the Burma Road each month. For the Himalayan supply line to succeed, it was clear that far more aircraft and crew were needed, along with a more substantial and dedicated organisational body to conduct such a complex affair.

The sense of urgency for the operation to be expanded was enhanced after the Japanese seized what remained of British Burma. The US State Department issued a memorandum on the supply situation which read:

*Continued Chinese resistance cannot be taken for granted; that the best way to insure against a Chinese collapse lies in sending materials, especially planes, and establishing an effective air transport into and out of China . . . We therefore recommend and urge that every reasonable effort be made to establish on a substantial scale air transport between India and China (original italics).<sup>42</sup>*

By December 1942, staff officials in Washington D.C. had come to fully appreciate the size of the task at hand. The Air Transport Command (ATC), which had eventual oversight over aerial logistical operations across all of the theatres of conflict, was formed out of a reorganisation of the various air logistical agencies in the US armed forces. One of its first tasks was to coordinate supply operations over the Himalayas. At the end of the war, the ATC had grown into a veritable army itself, comprising some 85,000 officers and men spread across the globe from San Francisco and Cairo to Munich and the Azores, an indication of the scope of the conflict as well as the extent of the involvement of the United States in the war.<sup>43</sup> Together, the aircraft of the commercial CNAC and the military

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<sup>42</sup> Cited in O.C. Spencer, *Flying the Hump: Memories of an Air War* (Texas A&M University Press: Texas, 1992), 46.

<sup>43</sup> Xu, *War Wings*, 171.



ATC formed the workhorse of the bridge between India and China across a region popularly known as 'the roof of the world'.

The five hundred mile air route between Chabua (the principal airfield in the Assam Valley) and Kunming that the Allied pilots took came to be nicknamed, in the spirit of irony, the Hump. The journey took between four to six hours, depending on weather conditions. Running first parallel to the Himalayan Ranges, and then across its north-south spur, the 'high' route was bound on both sides by mountains that ranged between ten to eighteen thousand feet in height. The Himalayan foot ridges that gave the Hump its name were a series of fourteen to sixteen thousand feet high mountains separated by two main valleys, which directed the Salween and Mekong Rivers towards Burma, Thailand, and Indochina.

Along this flight path, pilots flew DC-3s and C-46s cargo transports in poor weather. The strategic importance of the airlift missions meant that aircraft were almost always overloaded, making it difficult for pilots to get to a safe high altitude. The height of the mountains, with some pilots discovering unmarked peaks that were higher than Mount Everest, sometimes exceeded the capability ceiling of the transports anyway, and so pilots had to navigate between passes. Gale force winds ripped at control sticks, sudden bouts of violent turbulence caused aircraft to fall into uncontrollable dives, and ice made it nearly impossible to see out of the pilot windows. As CNAC pilot Robert J. Raines described in an interview in *Douglas Air Review* in 1944, the pitching and buffeting received by aircraft due to the unstable air currents was potentially catastrophic:

I was trying to get around a typhoon and wound up in a strange pass... at about 16,000 feet in a heavily-loaded DC-3. Suddenly I was caught in an updraft that whisked me up to 28,000 feet. There wasn't a damned thing I could do but try to keep the plane steady and ride to the top. Then, just as suddenly as I started going up, I started going down. It was like being swept over the Niagara Falls in a barrel. In a little more than two minutes I was dropped from 28,000 feet to 6,000 feet, and when we stopped, it was such a jar that I still can't see how the wings stayed on that plane. I just didn't think that planes could be built to take that sort of punishment.<sup>44</sup>

Raines' contemporary description of the route's flying conditions has much traction with Ho Weng Toh's memories of his service for the ATC. The bomber pilots of the CACW were sent to the airfield at Chabua in the Assam Valley between spells of combat missions to lend their piloting

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<sup>44</sup> Cited in Spencer, *Flying the Hump*, 37.

skills to the ATC. This was an unsurprising demand on the pilots of the Composite Wing. Most of the supplies going over the Hump were meant not for Nationalist formations, but the Fourteenth Air Force—well over 90 per cent of all of the cargo that was sent along the Himalayan air route were goods that were needed to sustain the operations of Chennault's air group, according to one Nationalist government estimate.<sup>45</sup> Gasoline for aircraft, for instance, was always in short supply, and it needed to be sent over in five galleon fuel cans in transport planes across the mountains straddling the Sino-Indian border. Even in the final year of the war it was not uncommon to see aircraft fuelled by numerous small five-galleon gasoline cans, passed along by long lines of coolies contracted by the Nationalist government.<sup>46</sup>

Pilots, guided only by basic instruments and blinded by sleet or snow and disoriented by clouds and constant buffeting, often drifted off-course and were lost. The unfortunate crew could expect not to survive due to the cold and utter isolation of these crash sites. When the weather cleared, Japanese fighter aircraft operating out of airbases in Burma patrolled the route with ruthless efficiency. Between December 1942, when Hump operations truly began in earnest under the direction of the ATC, and the end of the war in August 1945, over a third of the 3,026 pilots who flew on the route were killed or lost.<sup>47</sup> In one particularly bad night, the US Army and the CNAC lost a combined total of thirty-three aircraft due to difficult weather conditions.<sup>48</sup>

In Assam, Ho Weng Toh and Leong Ming Sen were finally able to reunite, over three years after being separated during the fall of Hong Kong.<sup>49</sup> Like Leong, Ho and his comrades quickly found themselves struggling against the challenging flying conditions of the Himalayas:

Those days, the aircraft they used were only two types—the DC-3 and the C-46. They are both propeller aircraft, and both are underpowered. Heavily-laden, and the worst part, a lot of weather, bad weather. High terrain, clouds, navigation aids very poor. All those add up together are hazards. That's why a lot of aircraft were lost. They ran out of fuel and crashed, or

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<sup>45</sup> Taylor, *The Generalissimo*, 271.

<sup>46</sup> Spencer, *Flying the Hump*, 39.

<sup>47</sup> Spencer, *Flying the Hump*, 9; as of December 2008, the U.S. military was still launching efforts to recover the remains of over four hundred aircrew still listed as missing. See *The Telegraph*, 15 December 2008.

<sup>48</sup> Author's correspondence with Leong Ming Sen, 8/2/2007.

<sup>49</sup> Author's correspondence with Leong Ming Sen, 8/2/2007.

flew into the mountains. So casualties were very high, higher than our combat missions.<sup>50</sup>

The importance of the supply missions undertaken by the pilots flying the Hump route can be framed in perspective in terms of the raw tonnage delivered. In December 1942, Allied and commercial transports carried 1,226 tons of war material across the Hump. A year later, deliveries across the Himalayan hump were averaging ten to twelve thousand tons per month. In July 1945, the air route reached its peak total of 71,045 tons delivered that month. By the end of the war, pilots from the CNAC and the ATC had delivered 721,700 tons of supplies into China in 167,285 sorties over the Himalayas.<sup>51</sup> Collectively, the transports brought with them more than just weapons, ammunition, and gasoline. Also among the cargo bound for China was carbon paper, Kotex, mules, soldiers, desks, typewriters, tomato ketchup, grain, oats, goats, currency, and even jeeps and trucks, cut into sections and loaded into cargo holds.<sup>52</sup> Across all of the theatres of war, no other aerial supply operation would come close to exceeding the Hump route in scale. It would only be superseded in scope and magnitude by the Berlin Airlift in 1948.

Leong was launched quickly into operational flying with the CNAC over the Hump, ferrying a wide variety of cargo. Most commonly, however, the Kunming-Assam Valley leg would see his DC-3 laden with tin ingots—one of the many forms of commodity payment made by the Chinese government in exchange for war supplies. From Dinjan airfield, where Leong's group operated out of, the ingots would be freighted to Calcutta, and then shipped to the United States. In the meantime, he would be sent back to Kunming, this time with his aircraft crammed with five-gallon cans of aviation gasoline. Precious breaks from the routine came when Leong was assigned to parachute food and supplies to Allied troops in advanced positions on the Burma front; otherwise, he was kept busy logging an average of around a hundred and twenty hours of flying time each month—a flight every day—making Hump crossings.

As the war drew to a close in 1945, therefore, there were a number of Malayan Chinese fighting on the China front. The enlistment documents generated by the CNAC, the CACW, and Nationalist army recruitment drives do not distinguish between overseas and mainland Chinese, and

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<sup>50</sup> Author's interview with Ho Weng Toh, 6/9/2008.

<sup>51</sup> Spencer, *Flying the Hump*, 12.

<sup>52</sup> Spencer, *Flying the Hump*, 47–48.

so attempting to map exactly how many there were throughout China is impossible in practice. We are left with survivor testimony to speak on behalf of groups. Oral history has its limitations, but when deployed carefully it is useful in this instance when archival records are not available (or identifiable as such). Ho Weng Toh and Leong Ming Sen estimated that there were over forty in service with either the Composite Wing or the CNAC, most of whom they had friendships with if for nothing else than because of their shared land of origin. In his correspondence with the author of this book before he passed away, Leong named three of his closest friends among the Malayan Chinese cohort in the CNAC, “Y.Y. Fong, K.T. Leong, and Jimmy Tai.”<sup>53</sup> Among his collection of photographs are images of other pilots who Ho Weng Toh readily identified as compatriots—Yow Siew Wah, Khoo Kee Siang, Lau Seng Tung, Saw Hock Chuan, S.T. Yeoh, and Fong Yew Weng.

Ho Weng Toh and Leong Ming Sen’s stories are part of a broader experience by dozens of Chinese from Malaya who found themselves in military service. Some paid the ultimate price for their desire to serve the cause they so fervently believed in. Such was the case with Tong Siew Ming, a fighter pilot with the CACW who was killed when his aircraft crashed on landing in Karachi. This chapter has not tried to argue that the Malayan Chinese made a fundamental difference with their contributions in a finely balanced war scenario. Their numbers were acutely limited, and by late 1944 the China theatre itself was no longer important within the broader context of the Second World War anyway. The American thrust through the central Pacific had succeeded beyond doubt, and it was now clear that Japan could be defeated without the war in China reaching a resolution in favour of the Allies.

But what the Malayan Chinese story in China tells us as historians about Singapore’s Pacific Second World War is that unlike the static experience of the Japanese occupation, the Pacific War was a conflict that was characterised by trans-national movement. Individuals like Ho Weng Toh, Leong Ming Sen, and their compatriots were historical actors in their own right, infused with agency, rather than hapless victims overtaken by war and occupation. The diaspora’s war against Japan across their Second World Wars reveals the long pull of ideology, drawing volunteers through vast networks on sojourns to fight so as to affirm an imagined connection with a political and cultural centre. The nature of industrialised war sent them

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<sup>53</sup> Author’s correspondence with Leong Ming Sen, 8/2/2007.

on even longer journeys after they pledged themselves to armed service. Even among those who did not explicitly seek out the conflict, their identification with China compelled them to do their utmost to take opportunities to fulfil a sense of patriotism when chances presented themselves. Taken together, the three frames of the Second World War presented in this book allow us to consider the global historical reality of Singapore's war and challenge its current geographical limitations. Just as importantly, they also give us a point of reference to begin to consider the power of memory politics in the postwar era, where the trans-national nature of diasporic history is submerged by the needs of the post-colonial state.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### FORGOTTEN FRAMES

A few years after the end of the Second World War, Robert Stone, the Empire Air Training Scheme enlistee who had befriended Tan Kay Hai at RAF Carberry in Canada, had a brief and unexpected meeting with his old friend in the capital of the British Empire. "I met your Grandfather for a few minutes after the war," Stone explained in a letter to Tan's granddaughter in 2001, "when I got on a bus in London and sat down next to him. He got off a minute or two later and only had time to tell me he was returning to Singapore the next day having been in England, I believe he said, on behalf of the Government of Singapore."<sup>1</sup> Since they last saw each other in Algiers in 1943, fate had sent each to a very different war. Stone was retrained as a Lancaster Bomber pilot with No. 550 Squadron, tasked with the strategic bombing of Germany at night. He flew twenty-nine missions before being removed from combat duties in 1945 due to a damaged eardrum. Following their chance encounter in London, the two would never meet again.

Stone's mentioning of his former comrade's affiliation with the Singapore government in the latter's postwar life is a useful starting point to paint an epilogue to the episodes highlighted in this book. In 1948, after completing a Diploma in Social Work in the University of London, Tan returned to Singapore, apparently intent on working in social welfare. Within two years though, he was flying again, this time for the colonial administration. Tan was instrumental in the creation of the forerunner of the Malaysian and Singapore Air Forces, the Malayan Auxiliary Air Force (MAAF). A decorated pilot, he was asked to train new flyers drawn from the colonial population for the MAAF in his capacity as Wing Commander. One of his trainees was RAF technician Jimmy Chew, who after his release from captivity on Java in 1945 returned to Singapore determined to learn how to fly the machines he had once worked on.<sup>2</sup> As the lead pilot of the MAAF, Tan had a public presence in colonial Singapore.

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from Robert P. Stone to Li Er Hanson, 20 August 2001 (from the Hanson family's personal collection).

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Jimmy Chew dated 27/9/2001, Imperial War Museum, Asc No. 24222.

He was aide-de-camp to the Governor of Singapore Sir Ronald Black, and took part in government events either in ceremonies and parades or flying with other pilots of the MAAF, such as a fly past to mark the opening of Singapore's new airport in 1955.<sup>3</sup>

1965 heralded independence for Singapore; it also saw an end to Tan's career. That year, citing poor health, he retired from flying and disappeared from public life. Jimmy Chew followed soon after, replaced by a generation of new pilots trained for the fledgling Republic of Singapore Air Force (RSAF). Tan Kay Hai spent the rest of his life in quiet seclusion at home, travelling only once to the UK for a reunion with former squadron mates from RAF No. 225 in the 1970s. When he died in 1991, aged 77, the only mention of his war came out of his obituary that had been paid for by family. In the public memory of this post-colonial world, there was no room for colonial servants and alternative loyalties. In the RSAF museum's exhibition on the air force's history, Tan, Chew, or others like them are unmentioned. Even the MAAF as an organisation is referred to only briefly, and even then as a fairly unimportant pre-history of the RSAF.

In similar fashion, Ho Weng Toh and Leong Ming Sen found their lives shaped irrevocably by the war. Their training with the CACW and the CNAC gave them piloting skills that were in demand, and so they made ideal recruits for commercial airlines in peacetime China. It was an attractive proposition. Life as pilots in cities like Shanghai was a dream for young, single men, Leong recalled. They were treated like celebrities, wining and dining in fine restaurants in the company of attractive young women. A spell in Ipoh after the cessation of hostilities was spent searching for and visiting their friends and families. In 1946, almost inevitably, Ho and Leong, along with other Malayan Chinese trained during the Pacific War, returned to China to fly with the China Air Traffic Corporation (in Ho's case) and the CNAC (in Leong's). Their idyllic lives were short-lived. When hostilities between Communist and KMT forces recommenced, both found themselves conscripted into flying transports for Nationalist government.

As the last of Chiang Kai Shek's armies began to collapse in 1949, they were involved in the evacuation of first Shanghai and then Nanjing, into the KMT's exile on Taiwan. Disillusioned with Chinese politics, both returned to Malaya where they were soon employed by the newly-formed Malayan Airways (later renamed Malaysia-Singapore Airlines) based in

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<sup>3</sup> *Straits Times*, 21 August 1955.



Singapore, first as ordinary commercial aviators, and then as instructor pilots. When Malaysia-Singapore Airlines splintered into two national carriers a few years after Singapore's independence, both decided to remain in Singapore and were given citizenship in the new state. As a former war veteran and experienced aviator, Ho in particular became a legend in the Singapore flying community. Among the pilots he trained for the airline, he was given the honorific title of 'Daddy-O'. Yet outside of that community, despite their high profile in the elite airline industry, there was no public mention of the war experiences of the Malayan Chinese pilots on the China-Burma-India front as the national war narrative came into existence. When the likes of Lim Bo Seng, Elizabeth Choy, and Adnan Saidi were selected for veneration as national heroes of the conflict who, the state suggested, embodied what the war meant to all Singaporeans, Ho, Leong, and their compatriots watched on from the margins.

The pilots' eventful postwar lives were extraordinary. Most of the other members of the China and Imperial diasporas who survived their wars slipped quietly back into obscurity. Some did not to return at all, choosing to remain at the centre as Wu Hui Min and Xie Zhang Nong did when they settled back in their home villages on the island of Hainan.<sup>4</sup> For the others who returned to the Nanyang region, there was no fanfare, no welcome home speech, no coverage in newspapers, and no publicised record. Left to their own devices again, the likes of Ng Gan Cheng, Tan Kim Soon, Koh Pei Shen, and Chia Soon Guan set about picking up where they had left off before their war. Koh was soon back on the docks once again, a hero among the closest of his friends but just another face in a sea of coolies to all others. Ng and Tan, who had become close during their time in Yunnan, found work ferrying workers in buses to construction sites. Postwar life for Chia Soon Guan saw him working in a succession of factories. Lee Kim Hock continued to sail with the Bibby Line for several more years following the end of the war in Europe, before settling back in Singapore to work for the Port Authority. In 1990, aged 72, he returned to the city that held a special place in his heart, Liverpool, to live out the remainder of his days.

Writing a book like this, one is inevitably confronted with the question of why the memories of Singapore's other wars have been forgotten, and who has been responsible for engendering this forgetting. In their excellent survey *War Memory and the Making of Modern Malaysia and Singapore*,

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<sup>4</sup> C.W. Chan, *Light on the Lotus Hill: Shuang Lin Monastery and the Burma Road* (Khoon Chee Vihara: Singapore, 2009), 54–56.

historians Kevin Blackburn and Karl Hack have begun to advance the historiography towards more sophisticated analyses of commemoration and memorialisation. A more comprehensive, theoretical discussion on the complexity of the relationship between state narratives and private memories pursued more deeply along the lines of war remembrance literature pioneered in the United States and Australia by notable scholars such as Jay Winter, Ken Inglis, and Alistair Thomson is beyond the scope of this book. Such a study would require a different framework, and a dedicated methodology towards the analysis of private memories and their relationship with national narratives. But we can engage in some speculation here on the forces that are at work.

In attempting to understand what Wang Gungwu has called “the politics of forgetfulness”, one cannot ignore the role and the needs of the post-colonial state.<sup>5</sup> As discussed earlier in this book, through the telling of a story that the war was solely about occupation, shared suffering, and ultimately nascent nationalism and state sovereignty, the memory of the Second World War is staged as a unifying force that is the driving force behind the creation of the nation-state. At the unveiling of the Civilian War Memorial in 1967, the Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Kuan Yew delivered a speech that epitomised the state’s position on the war’s meaning:

We meet not to rekindle old fires of hatred, nor to seek settlements for blood debts. We meet to remember the men and women who were the hapless victims of one of the fires of history... This piece of concrete commemorates an experience, which, in spite of its horrors, served as a catalyst in building a nation out of the young and unestablished community of diverse immigrants. We suffered together. It told us that we share a common destiny. And it is through sharing such common experiences that the feeling of living and being one community is established.”<sup>6</sup>

But what emerges from the recovering of the private memories and accounts of the conflict in this book reveals a fracture between them and the nation’s creation story. For the diasporas, the conflicts that shaped their lives were not seen through the lens of nationalism in the manner of a post-colonial project. Instead, their wars and experiences were defined within particular ideological frames—specifically, existing as members of an Imperial or China diaspora—and allegiances to different centres, rather than the nation-state that was yet to be. In other words, one of

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<sup>5</sup> See G. Wang, “Memories of War: World War II in Asia”, in Lim, P.P.H. and Wong, D. (eds), *War and Memory in Malaysia and Singapore* (ISEAS: Singapore, 2000), 11–22.

<sup>6</sup> *Straits Times*, 16 February 1967.

the forces that has pushed Singapore's other wars to the margins of public remembrance is the modern nation-state's need to invent historical narratives about itself to legitimise its existence. The selectiveness of the national war narrative in picking what stories to tell and which heroes to cast stems from a need to ignore allegiances and themes that are contradictory to the interests of the nation-state, or pose a challenge to the mythologised cohesion of the nation.

Towards the end of our interview, I asked Ho Weng Toh what his thoughts were on the fact that the stories of Malayan Chinese who fought in China and Europe were unrecognised in Singapore's war history. His reply, delivered with a mix of resignation and frustration, was striking. They were irrelevant because "we didn't fight for our country (Singapore)", he suggested. But did anyone? Inadvertently, buried in Ho's simple statement was a powerful comment on the ahistorical nature of the national narrative. Lim Bo Seng, the Malayan Chinese partisan trained by the British Special Operations Executive before being betrayed to the Japanese and tortured to death, was no more a Singaporean than Ho was, or Tan Kay Hai, Ng Gan Cheng, or Lee Kim Hock for that matter. Lim was born in Fujian, China, and it is unlikely that during the war he would have rationalised his actions through the lens of postwar independence. Yet he was selected for veneration as a national war hero by the Singapore state through history textbooks, remembrance activities, and documentaries. This was chiefly because his actions took place within the acceptable framework of the national war. He had been caught resisting the brutal Japanese regime in Malaya, and the geography in which the story occurred made it easy to transform the story into a 'Singaporean' one. It would be far more difficult to tell a convincing story in school curricula and public commemoration about why someone who was fighting on the other side of the world in a foreign army should be thought of as a national hero and contributing to the creation of the nation-state. What the national narrative tell us of memory politics in Singapore is therefore quite clear: in the post-colonial world, the needs of the present are served by reinventing the past. The memories of Malayan Chinese (indeed, of all colonials) are modified and integrated into the Singaporean national narrative when they are advantageous for the nation-state, but they are otherwise submerged by its weight when they are not.

It would be easy though to assume that the forgetting of Singapore's other wars has been driven solely by the state, especially given the involvement of a regime that is unashamedly interventionist in its policies. But the veterans themselves also played an important role in the

marginalisation of alternative war experiences. Ho Weng Toh built on his earlier comment with a remark that the stories of the Malayan Chinese in China and India “are not relevant to my country”. This was echoed in theme in every other interview conducted for this book. Koh Pei Shen questioned time and again whether what he was describing was suitable as a topic for a book on Singapore’s history, as did Ng Gan Cheng, Chia Soon Guan, and others. All of the interviewees in this book conflated the past with the present in their interviews, principally succumbing to viewing the Second World War through its national and post-colonial frame, as a war that created Singapore. What they did was irrelevant to this story arc and therefore it seemed logical in their minds to exclude their war experiences. They made sense of their actions within the framework of the present that they lived in, and hence they did not just submit to the national war narrative, but actively subordinated their stories to the rules established by the nation’s story. None spoke of their wars outside of a relatively small circle of friends and family members. Nor did they ever think of what they did as being a part of Singapore’s war history. “Singapore’s history takes place in Singapore”, explained Chia Soon Guan in an interview, “the things I am talking about are only relevant to China’s history, not our country”.

This book has made as its primary aim the recovery of forgotten frames of Singapore’s wars as experienced by the Chinese community. In mapping the experiences of their wars, this book has mounted a challenge to the traditional periodisation and geographical delineation of the war. It has also identified the historiographical omissions that have stemmed from subscribing to the ahistorical themes established by the national Second World War. Recognising the importance of un-wedding the national war narrative from historical reality, this book has argued, is critical for studies of Singapore’s wartime past. When done successfully, it unveils historical worlds that have existed hitherto on the margins of historiography and public remembrance. We have seen how foregrounding people’s ideologies and pushing national narratives and spaces into the background reveals plural pasts where a unifying desire for state sovereignty has little traction with historical experiences. Just as there were multiple communities living in the colony at the time, so too were there multiple frames through which the colonised citizenry understood and created meanings out of the conflict.

This study has identified two ideological frames within which the overseas Chinese made sense of the Second World War—a China frame, and an Imperial frame. Centuries of migratory history to Malaya had created

one faction committed to the system of empire, and another loyal to an idea of China. Consequently, each diasporas's Second World War was a separate conflict that was defined by specific forces, carried particular meanings, and occurred at different times. For China's diaspora, war came to Malaya in 1937 with the outbreak of hostilities between the home country and Japan. They mobilised whatever resources they had at their disposal. Thousands travelled to China to serve, while many thousands more formed the support network required to facilitate this movement back to the centre. The war in Europe in 1939 brought the Anglophone imperial diaspora into a war effort that drew on the resources of Britain's global empire. This faction too drew on their resources and capital in a display of loyalty and a desire to preserve the British world system.

A third frame—that of the Pacific War—emerged when the conflict between China and Japan escalated to encompass the great colonial powers of Asia. In many ways, this was an expansion of the Sino-Japanese frame, yet it was also crucially different in how it was experienced. The global nature of the Second World War, perhaps absent from the war between China and Japan, is strikingly obvious when one considers the stories of the Malayan Chinese pilots whose wars were captured within this frame. Their wars involved a degree of mobility over vast distances unheard of by those who took part in the war between the two regional rivals. In place of an ad hoc system of volunteerism driven primarily by non-state entities, this frame witnessed involvement in a complex system of industrialised warfare where parts of the world were transformed into production stations, sending out successive cohorts of personnel. In the context of periodisation too, this was a different war. It began just as the conflict on the Burma Road came to an end.

Historians are often called upon to tell stories. That is one of the things that they do. Sometimes they tell stories about why a people's allegiance should be to the nation, and not to their religion, their race, or their class. On other occasions, historians tell stories to remind us that the nation is neither ancient nor eternal. Telling the stories of the diasporas and their wars falls in the latter category. As narratives that pre-date the nation-state, their stories remind us of the newness of the nation, built as it is on imagination and invention, on new allegiances, new narratives, and new histories. They also reveal what needs to be forgotten in order to make the nation's story succeed.



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