

Gin, Ooi Keat. 2011. *The Japanese Occupation of Borneo, 1941-1945*. London: Routledge (Routledge Studies in the Modern History of Asia, Vol. 65). xxiii + 199 pp. ISBN 978-0-415-45663-0 (hbk); 978-0-203-85054-1 (ebk).

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Because few historian-scholars and students hitherto have given much *Schrift* to the role of the Japanese Empire in Southeast Asia, the Occupation of both British Borneo – Brunei, Sarawak and North Borneo – and Dutch Borneo in 1941 to 1945 has by and large remained an elusive, unexplored or inadequately explored subject. And it is precisely for these reasons alone that we must address the place of Imperial Japan and her occupation of Southeast Asia—what H. B. Jassin had termed “di masa Jepang” (1948)—during the mid-twentieth century.¹

Nor is the absence of any serious scholarship in the area always clear.

Certainly, the annexation and colonization of Korea and Taiwan by Japan as early as 1895 represented a historical demarcation of territories seemingly already set into place and accepted by the other Colonial powers at large; as such, scarce attention was paid as Japan progressed and expanded her borders over the next quarter of a century beyond the immediate region. Put differently, the inhumane behavior characterizing the entrance of the Japanese into Nanjing in December, 1937—however much History would term it a “rape”—is part and parcel of a series of untold atrocities as soldiers pushed beyond the puppet-state

of Manchuria and penetrated what remained of China, simultaneously forcing the Kuo Ming Tang to the fringes of the Middle Kingdom toward retreat on the remote island of Taiwan, in a move that would haunt the collective Chinese consciousness even to this day.²

Juxtaposed with this series of retreats were the atrocities arising from the Japanese attack of Pearl Harbor on the 7th of December, 1941, the act that in and of itself drew the United States into the Pacific Theatre and a war covering much of Asia proper.

And what do these events have in common? At the very least, they underscore that the Japanese Empire was not satisfied as she moved with relative ease through East Asia and beyond. Acknowledging an insatiable need for an expendable source of manpower and natural resources, they felled the Philippines, and from there, they launched successive, successful attacks throughout Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands.

In spite of such an overwhelmingly significant presence in the region, the Japanese presence beyond East Asia remained enigmatic for most of the latter part of the last century, save the biased insights of Mark R. Peattie, Professor of modern history and Japanese Studies at Columbia University. His *Nan'yo: The Rise and Fall of the Japanese in Micronesia, 1885-1945*, its many obvious shortcomings unchallenged, thereafter set the intellectual tone for discussing the Japanese Empire in the area even as it erected and celebrated his authoritarian—

and at times anti-intellectual--understanding of how Japan built up, governed, then lost its colonies in Micronesia. His view of the particular historical moment—one largely unchallenged by his contemporaries—left little room for serious discussion and none for questions: the colonies in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands, to his way of thinking, would most likely have enjoyed a *better* economic status had the war in the Pacific Theatre ended differently, leaving Japanese in control.

Fortunately, however, with time comes change and the increased opportunity to question those who came before us. Likewise, native scholars from the affected regions in the final decade of the last century, coming into their own and incorporating their own historical points of reference, would challenge long-standing interpretations as they set about rewriting *their* history; in doing so they lay waste to earlier myopic interpretations of the place and importance of Japan to the region.

Gin Ooi Keat is one such significant voice to arise from the babble, and as he found his voice and came into his own, he became perhaps the foremost contemporary authority on the period. Professor of Social and Economic History in the School of Humanities at the Universiti Sains Malaysia (Penang, Malaysia), as well as a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society (London, UK) and formerly of the Faculty of Politics and International Studies at the University of Hull (Hull, UK), he has established himself as a social and economic historian through a

number of significant and informed monographs on Borneo; in particular, (1998, 1999, 2004, 2007, and 2011) *and* the highly acclaimed editor of the 2004 multi-volume encyclopedia of Southeast Asia within historical contexts. The latter, furthermore, presented both the mechanism and the theoretical framework permitting us to explore and come to a fuller understanding of the geopolitical significance of the region for many years to come. Currently, he serves both as the chief editor of the *International Journal of Asia-Pacific Studies* and as series editor of the APRU-USM Asia Pacific Studies Publications Series.

Doubtless, his recent writing—whether focused on the British role in Borneo, on larger questions of Western colonialism across the region or on the aftermath of the resulting lacunae following the eventual retreat of Japan from the region—has gone far to rectify our readings of recent history as a whole: collectively, insofar as he examines pre-war foreign interests in Borneo and analyzes the role of the Japanese military invasion and occupation, he contrasts the different regimes of the Imperial Japanese Army, (located almost exclusively in the North) and the Navy as he questions with unyielding rigor the incorporation of local economies under the auspices of the so-called Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere and its largely impotent effects on the economy of the region.

Well read and researched, well structured and copiously illustrated, and especially well written with a succinct, concise style that is simultaneously always ever-so-elegant and refreshing, his recent work on Borneo (2011) is of particular

pedagogical importance to students of the period. Two particular strands of thought come immediately to mind as significant for how they affect our understanding of the region, whether before and during the Japanese Occupation or following their liberation.

From the landings of the Imperial Japanese Army on the shores of Miri in December 1941 to the liberation of Batu Lintang Prisoner of War/Internment Camp in September 1945 by the Australian Kuching Force, Gin's steadfast tracing of the increased presence of the Japanese throughout the region thrusts us forward. At the same time, he strips us of any lingering complacency or remnants of erstwhile affluence, now no more than the faltering memories of some now-distant lifestyle of unappreciated comforts and untold pleasantries.

In their stead, his narratives leave us more likely than not abandoned, quite *literally* sequestered in internment camps, among other inmates and intimates alike, left to themselves and now barely eking out something vaguely akin to existence, in filth, hunger and exhaustion on the one hand; or thrown to "the lions," so to speak on the other hand. We are hunted and haunted by the ritual of daily sadistic beatings and ill-treatment, or the constant fear of death, be it from the likes of disease, malnutrition or cold-blooded massacre. Or worse still—and Gin is to be applauded both for having drawn attention to the very subject that the Japanese government, even now, denies, and the irrefutable, copious documentation that he pulls together to relate these tales—as the women are given

over to suffering the comforts that only they could afford their Japanese captors. Hundreds of thousands of such women remained behind, remembered if only in the bits and pieces of detail, occasionally recalled, of the services they had been compelled in the face of death to provide.

As the evidence mounts from his excellent research, Gin leaves us an exacting portrait in a compelling, always provocative recounting of the Pacific War and Japanese Occupation across *Kita* (North, the previously British-Occupied regions, including Brunei and Sarawak, hereafter “ruled “ by the Imperial Army) and *Minami* (South, the previously Dutch-Occupied territories, now under the Japanese Navy). *Boruneo*, as the region came to be partitioned and renamed. Gin leaves no stone unturned it would seem, lending further support to his many insights and observations with the powerful support taken from personal documents, (among them official journals and private diaries, formal letters and notes hurriedly scrawled across the page by innocent bystanders) read alongside semi-official reports of native and Japanese leaders alike. Adding to the interest and the pace of the narratives as they unfold, these many documents were penned during incarceration or later attempts at escape. Put differently, an immediacy or urgency permeates the narratives themselves and is equaled only by the sense of imminent danger and uncertainty accompanying the Occupation itself.

A parallel narrative also runs throughout the volume, as Gin explores and evaluates the overall impact of the Japanese Occupation of Sarawak on the

indigenous people, as well as the *Peranakan*, those Chinese inhabitants who now called the region home, and the minority European community. As if directly challenging the long-held assumptions of Peattie, he goes to great lengths to examine how each community responded to Japanese wartime policies, and as he does so, his analyses provide the gauge by which the extent to which the effects of occupation, positively or otherwise, on the lives and attitudes of the people could be quantified and measured. Significantly, he challenges the assumption already so deeply ingrained in contemporary scholarship, namely that the Occupation had initiated and thereafter promoted beneficial developments that in short order transformed the history of Southeast Asian and the Pacific Islands. Backed by copious, well organized documentation, he concludes that however much the events of the Occupation may represent a “turning point” for the region and its diverse populations, at no time do they amount to anything more than a disruption or delay in economic development. In the worst of cases, these events stunted if not halted the very physical and intellectual well-being of the region to such a perverse degree that many areas have yet to recover fully.

Clearly, the volume of material Gin presents in this (or any of his volumes) warrants the highest possible recommendation for inclusion among the collections of public, undergraduate and high-school libraries alike. The writing is clear, jargon-free, and possessed of a certain elegance without even once distracting from the topics on hand. Furthermore, the sheer depth with which the

author covers certain heretofore ignored details from the history of the Japanese Occupation—in particular his significant discussion of the place of comfort of women in the overall scheme of the camps—is reason enough I believe to make the material available to one and all. Unfortunately, at this printing, this and other works are available only as hardcover or in ebook formats, both of which can prove extraordinarily expensive, and were the volumes intended to serve as textbooks proper, prove to be cost-prohibitive. Nor would such a decision to use them in such a manner seem practical on any level (the graduate and specialist levels excluded, of course), given that the breadth of material is sufficient and relevant to, say, no more than a week or so of a year-long survey course. Ideally, were the volumes much less expensive, then they would serve students well. In fact, insofar as the material provides a fine example of historical research and its presentation at its best, I have no doubt that students and instructors alike would benefit much from a thorough reading and rereading over the term of a long course.³ The price, however, is so prohibitive, especially during the current economic crisis, that it would be ill-advised to require the work as a primary reading. Instead, it might benefit everyone involved to place the texts (or preferably several copies) on reserve in a central, restricted location.

NOTES

¹See, for example, Jassin (1948). Consider also Multatuli (1927) for a vivid pre-Occupation image of Dutch Colonial life across the Indonesia archipelago.

²The definitive history based upon extensive interviews with survivors and her redoubtable review of newly discovered documents, Iris Chang's *The Rape Of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust Of World War II* (2012) discusses in graphic detail how the Japanese army swept into the ancient city of Nanking: within weeks, more than 300,000 Chinese civilians and soldiers were systematically raped, tortured, and murdered—a death toll exceeding that of the atomic blasts of Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined.

The Japanese literary record, too, attests to the horrors of the event. Ishikawa Tatsuzō's *Ikite iru heitai*, beautifully and faithfully translated by Zeljko Cipris as *Soldiers Alive* (2003), is without argument the best example of war literature to emerge from the Sino-Japanese War of 1937 to 1945. In Japan, the novella was published in the absence of any discernible editorial interference as a strong, compelling and unwavering indictment not only of the conduct of the Japanese military in China but also of war itself.

³As an alternative, I might suggest that the various volumes by Ooi Keat Gin, this text included, be placed on reserve in a common reading area. At the same time, I also suggest that the Dutch film *Oeroeg* (Dir. Hans Hylkema, 1993), based upon Hella S. Haasse's 1948 novel by the same name) be made available for public viewing, thereby providing a stimulating picture of the Occupation and its aftermath. From a historical perspective, the novel, set in the war of decolonization itself, appears in the middle of the war of decolonization; as such, it could not have been more topical.

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