

Overcome by Nationalism: Japanese Occupation of Southeast Asia (1942–1945) as Remembered by the Occupiers

SATOSHI NAKANO

ABSTRACT

Up until the 1980s, debates on the historical significance of the Japanese Occupation of Southeast Asia (hereinafter referred to as JOSA) from 1942–45, whether it could be viewed as “a watershed” in the region’s history or not, had largely been led by American, European, and Southeast Asian scholars. With more historical sources in Japanese (the language of the occupier) made available and a growing number of Japanese scholars joining the discussion since the 1990s, understudied questions have emerged about the impact of the Japanese Occupation on the eventual dissolution of the

Japanese empire and on the Japanese who learned “a lot” from their failed colonial adventure in Southeast Asia. This article briefly summarizes recent Japanese scholarship (including this writer’s) on these questions. It concludes that, after all, the Japanese Occupation, based on the accounts of the occupiers, is not so much about liberating Asia from the West but about being overcome by Asian nationalism and Western modernity, or even about being liberated by Asian nationalism and Western modernity from the already dying Japanese empire.

KEYWORDS

Japanese occupation, nationalism, policy of appeasement, liberating Asia from the West, Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere

IN THE LANGUAGE OF THE OCCUPIERS

Debates on the historical significance of the Japanese Occupation of Southeast Asia (JOSA) during World War II had been led primarily by scholars from the United States, Europe, and Southeast Asian countries until the 1980s. The topic was whether the Japanese Occupation period was “a watershed” in the history of Southeast Asia or not. The thesis was first suggested by Harry Benda¹ in his studies regarding Indonesian Islam under the Japanese Occupation. Later, using the term, “a watershed,” Josef Silverstein advocated the premise as applicable to the entire Southeast Asian experience.² It became a sort of an

established view.³ Their views were consequently challenged by scholars with strong and reputable background in socio-economic and local history such as Alfred McCoy, who challenged “a watershed” theory by presenting an alternative “continuity” thesis. He argued that in spite of physical destruction, there were no detectable changes that occurred in Philippine politics and society. McCoy attempted to apply this thesis generally to several regions of Southeast Asia under the Japanese Occupation and went as far as to liken them to “the villages of bamboo houses toppled by a strong tropical typhoon, utterly flattened but quickly reassembled.”⁴ Considering the political upheaval Southeast Asian nations have undergone since World War II, it is only but natural that the debate over “a watershed” theory persists in JOSA studies. It is worth asking if major political transformations also brought about social change; and what role Japan really played in the process. In many ways, the impact of the Japanese Occupation on Southeast Asian modern history have been and will continue to be major questions.

Since the late 1980s to the early 1990s, JOSA studies have been undertaken by an increasing number of Japanese scholars who specialized in Southeast Asian Studies including those who studied in good universities abroad. One such scholar is Aiko Kurasawa,⁵ from Cornell University in the United States, with her study on the social transformation of the peasant society in Java under the Japanese Occupation. In her meticulously researched account, she examined the question of “a watershed” theory. An exceptional pioneer was Teruhiko Iwatake,⁶ who was born in 1911. He was assigned to the Southern

Military Administration's logistic management section during the war as a key civilian. After his retirement in 1972, he returned to his alma mater, the University of Tokyo, to study JOSA and eventually published his doctoral dissertation on the Japanese economic policy during the occupation of Southeast Asia. Mr. Iwatake was extraordinary because he not only wrote history for himself but also gave a voice to those who served in Southeast Asia during the war. These people started speaking out about their wartime experiences in their retirement age and became interviewees on several occasions.

Meanwhile, more documents have become available. In 1985, the National Institute for Defense Studies War History Division published a compilation of selected JOSA documents⁷ stored in its archives. The final product of its decades-long publication was its *War History Series* [*Senshi-Sōsho*]. Emperor Hirohito died in January 1989 and his long-rumored “monologue” transcribed by the diplomat Terasaki Hidenari in 1946 was found and published in 1990.⁸ This publication had a huge impact in many ways. One major consequence was getting rid of the psychological barriers or taboos that enabled people possessing confidential wartime documents to disclose and publish them. The establishment of the Japan Center for Asian Historical Records (JCAHR), as one of Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi's efforts for reconciliation on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of World War II in 1994, also bolstered Japan's war history studies. After years of preparation, the JCAHR opened its digital archives in 2001, which has become the largest digitized repository of Japanese modern history available in the world.⁹

Another big boost was given by the Toyota Foundation, which supported joint research projects on JOSA, on a country-to-country basis, for three years. The projects started with Indonesia, followed by the Philippines then Malaysia-Singapore, and ended with Burma. In 1990, the Toyota Foundation commissioned Prof. Ikehata Setsuho, the leading Japanese authority on Philippine history, to organize the Forum for the Research and Gathering of Materials concerning the Japanese Occupation of the Philippines (FJOP). Scholars (then a relatively younger generation) from different disciplines were recruited (including this writer). The first meeting was held at Sophia University in Tokyo. Prof. Ricardo T. Jose of the University of the Philippines, the foremost historian of World War II in the Philippines, lectured on the Japanese occupation of the Philippines in general and the status of known historical materials. For the second meeting, Dr. Teruhiko Iwatake, the pioneering scholar on JOSA history was invited as interviewee.

This project was a golden opportunity to start the research on the history of Japanese Occupation of the Philippines. Teaching at Kobe University in 1990, this writer was assigned to conduct interviews in the Kansai (Western Metropolis) area. One of the persons interviewed was Mr. Hitomi Junsuke (1916–), a former army captain who worked for the propaganda corps and pacification campaigns in the rural provinces in the Philippines. His experiences and postwar recollections inspired and motivated this writer in coming up with his own version of JOSA history. There were also opportunities to interview people who personally knew President Jose P. Laurel,

including Mr. Hamamoto Masakatsu (1905–1996) who was a special advisor/liaison for President Laurel during the Japanese occupation.

The FJOP project produced in 1996 the first-ever compilation of monographs on Japanese occupation of the Philippines both in Japanese and in English,¹⁰ an oral history collection¹¹ and several publications of newly-found historical documents. The projects of the other countries were equally productive. In 1996, these projects came together to hold a joint symposium and later published a selection of essays [in Japanese] entitled *Japanese Occupation in Southeast Asian History*.¹² This book encapsulated the achievements of these joint research projects.

The volumes published during the 1990s basically asked more or less the same questions surrounding “a watershed” theory and gave new insights gleaned from newly-available Japanese source materials and oral history. JOSA studies in Japan, however, did not stop there. Despite the accessibility of sources in Japanese, the language of the occupiers, and more scholars in the field of Japan’s modern history joining JOSA studies,¹³ there are still aspects and questions pertaining to JOSA that are not yet explored.

Ironically, the more Japanese sources are explored, the more it becomes glaring that Imperial Japan, as occupier, had no power, resource, and capacity in dealing with the occupied people who surprisingly showed a strong will to be free and to be by themselves. The conclusions in this writer’s book published in 2012¹⁴ with a forthcoming English edition argue that JOSA, based on the accounts of

the Japanese occupiers, is not so much about freeing Asia from Western shackles but about being overcome by Asian nationalism and Western modernity or even, about being liberated by Asian nationalism and Western modernity from the bondage of an already moribund Japanese empire.

NOT SO MUCH ABOUT LIBERATING ASIA FROM THE WEST

One of the most interesting Japanese archival materials that was made available on the website of Japan Center for Asian Historical Records (JACAR) in recent years is the *Classified Journal of the War*¹⁵ kept by the Army General Staff War Planning and Management Detail. The *Classified Journal of the War* should be carefully read and analyzed. It consists of military memoranda, diaries, and postwar narratives written by Colonel Ishii Akiho,¹⁶ and other Army Staff officers who planned and drafted the general administrative guidelines for the military occupation of Southeast Asia. These documents contain “inside stories” of the Imperial General Headquarters (Daihon’ei) that disclose the planning officers’ deep suspicions about Japan’s military and national industrial capacity and preoccupation with acquiring military resources to fuel the war effort on the China and Manchuria fronts, which led to the ill-fated decision to invade Southeast Asia. The same preoccupation with the “war for resources” was a decisive factor in the formation of Japan’s occupation policy, predicated by the three principles of “restoration of law and order,” “use of existing administrative assets,” and “materiel procurement on the ground (for invading forces).”

These planners, imagining themselves to be military professionals and realists, opposed the rhetoric to liberate Asia from the West. They feared that such rhetoric would instigate colonial nationalism, eventually hampering Japan's war effort. It should be questioned, however, whether or not these planners could really be called "realists." It had been hardly possible for Japan to occupy Southeast Asia without propagating anything about the region's liberation from Western colonial rule. It is safe to say that putting the subject on the table could be the only plausible and acceptable justification for the occupied people to endure the hardships expected under Japanese military rule.

Interestingly, the concept of the "holy war of liberation of Asia from the West" was widely shared among the Japanese—soldiers and civilians alike—sent to Southeast Asia as the occupiers. Intoxicated by the initial military success, the Japanese press trumpeted ideological clichés such as liberation, holy war, race war, rehabilitation, and a return to Asian authenticity. These slogans and catchphrases rhetorically urged the occupied people to follow Japan's lead and transform their societies, economies, and cultures by joining the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. In reality, however, the initial "success" of the JOSA rested mainly on maintaining or implementing pre-existing structures of domination built by the West, i.e., the American, British, and Dutch colonial regimes. Thus, Japan's initial occupation policy in most of the region became concerned with appeasing or accommodating the occupied people, even including the Western colonialists, whose collaboration was deemed

necessary like in the reopening of the oil refinery facilities in Palembang, capital of South Sumatra, Indonesia.

This policy of appeasement, however, was not the purpose at all of the Japanese occupation, but rather the means for implementing the principles underlying a “war for resources.” Therefore, it had to be backed up by coercion and military force, as exemplified so clearly by the atrocities committed in the Sook Ching crackdown and the purge in Singapore in February and March 1942.¹⁷ Since Japan lacked the domestic production capacity and resources to stabilize the Southeast Asian economy, it was compelled to drain the region of even a subsistence livelihood under the “materiel procurement on the ground” principle. It was only a matter of time before its heavy-handedness would become business as usual as the socio-economic situation deteriorated, area by area, especially in the Philippines, among other occupied countries.

REALITY UNDER JAPAN: SAKAKIBARA AND HITOMI’S ODYSSEYS

The diary of Sakakibara Masaharu (1911–2002), then an army lieutenant and a member of Japan’s feudal aristocracy, published in 1998, gives interesting details about the real conditions under Japan. Sakakibara was an employee of the Taiwan Development Co. at the time of his induction in 1938. Possibly because of his noble background, he was assigned to the Southern Army General Headquarters and offered myriad opportunities for inspection tours around occupied Southeast Asia.

Sakakibara's diary is especially interesting because of its vivid storyline in its first pages that relates an attitude transformation from blatant antagonism towards the West to a gradual change of tone the more he was exposed to Southeast Asia. His hostile words against Western colonizers soon turned into expressions of admiration for the scale and quality of their technology that he witnessed in the plantations, mines, and other infrastructures. Sakakibara was deeply impressed by the efficiency and rational thought that had gone into colonial management, but at the same time, he painfully realized the inadequate Japanese human and material resources that would replace such positive achievements.

Another intriguing chronicle was written by Hitomi Junsuke, who was redeployed from Manchuria, where he served as an intelligence officer fighting the anti-Japanese resistance movement and assigned to the Propaganda Detail of the Watari Group Corps (14th Army), the expeditionary forces to the Philippines.¹⁸ His assignment was to lead a propaganda detachment around the rural provinces of Northern Luzon in order to persuade the anti-Japanese Filipino guerrillas in the region to lay down their arms and surrender. He also submitted confidential intelligence reports from the provinces to the Watari Corps General Headquarters. These reports, which he managed to smuggle secretly to his parents in Japan as "mementos," along with his postwar recollections, reveal the reality of the Occupation in the Philippines, where the Japanese were seen as "the enemy" with more intensity and obstinacy than in any other area of Southeast Asia.

During a rather pastoral propaganda junket in southern Luzon in the early months of 1942, Hitomi was part of a scene in which a spiritually driven officer gave a passionate sermon to a local audience of peasants on the significance of nationalist ideology in hardly translatable Japanese. A Filipino interpreter, a former resident of Japan, soon gave up translating and started talking about a lost-and-found episode and his conviction that the Japanese were all “good guys,” eliciting a rousing applause from his fellow citizens. Inspired by that embarrassing incident, Hitomi decided to abandon pushing the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere ideology. He encouraged his audiences, even those who believed the United States was right and just and would eventually win the war, to take a “wait-and-see” attitude, by simply surrendering their arms and keeping close to home to protect themselves and their families.

This “wait-and-see” was very successful in northern Luzon in mid-1942, at a time when the guerrilla resistance, although obstinate, still lacked logistic support from the Allied forces. However, during a similar campaign in Panay in October 1942, Hitomi gradually discovered the strategy was no longer effective in the midst of the economic crisis that had befallen local communities and of the guerrilla movements that were increasingly supported by the Allies. He was forced to admit that the Japanese could not possibly compete with the kind of Allied counter-propaganda that promised full military pay and even retirement benefits to properly registered anti-Japanese guerrillas.¹⁹

Curiously enough, relatively self-aware Japanese occupiers, such as Sakakibara and Hitomi, began to seriously question the “superiority” of Japanese ideology as the foundation for occupying Southeast Asia. For example, Sakakibara increasingly expressed frustration and anger about the Japanese ruthlessness he witnessed wherever he went. After becoming conscious of the growing contempt of the occupied for their Japanese occupiers, presuming “they all hang out in brothels,” he finally wrote, “I could not but cry out that the Southern Military Administration should start by governing the Japanese” (28 September 1942). Kon Hidemi’s postwar self-deprecating memoir²⁰ on his troubled days in Manila with philosopher Miki Kiyoshi identified as well the “ugly Japanese,” military and civilian alike, who did nothing but seize the possessions and bodies of the occupied without even an inkling of reciprocity.

OVERCOME BY ASIAN NATIONALISM

There is also the question on the gap between the “independence” as articulated by the occupiers, and the “independence” as demanded by the nationalist political leaders of Southeast Asian countries. They have often been referred to as puppets and collaborators. With respect to this issue, the rarely-discussed bone of contention within the Japanese military leadership was over policy regarding “independence” during the initial months of the war. It largely pitted Prime Minister Tōjō Hideki against the Imperial Headquarters (in Tokyo), as well as the area corps on the ground in Burma, the Philippines, and Indonesia against the Southern Army General Staff (in Saigon). Both

Tōjō and the area corps commanders showed more or less a willingness to accommodate the desire for “independence” professed by the colonial nationalists. On the contrary, the Imperial Headquarters and the Southern Army General Staff strongly opposed making any promise or concession which they believed would hamper Japan’s “war for resources.”

On the one hand, even for those who were more willing to accommodate the vision held by PM Tōjō and other collaborating nationalists of Southeast Asia, the “independence” they imagined Japan would grant was largely thought to be similar to that conferred on Manchuria. It was premised on Japanese military presence and political guidance, under which the principles of state sovereignty and equality were not considered to be integral ingredients. On the other hand, Southeast Asian nationalist leaders collaborating with Japan imagined and pursued independence based on the very principles of sovereignty and equality. Then, the war worsened and caused the latter to exert more effort with the Greater East Asia Conference of November 1943. It was reflective of Japan’s inability to force its subjects to conform to the Greater East Asia new order.

Thus, the last year-and-a-half of JOSA, could possibly be retold as not simply the failure of Japan’s reckless military adventure in the region, but also as the occupiers being overwhelmed by colonial nationalism. The occupiers could have momentarily become instigators of this nationalist sentiment, but certainly never dominators, by piecing together the narratives of the Japanese who

recalled their encounters with the occupied people in Southeast Asia. In this context, the seemingly opposite stories of the nationalists, i.e., of the Battle of Imphal (March to July 1944) and the Japanese alliance with Subhas Chandra Bose and the Indian National Army, and of the Philippine President Jose P. Laurel's steadfast diplomacy refusing to actively collaborate with the Japanese Occupation forces,²¹ could be seen as an identical show of their independence, or of being themselves. Cases of armed revolts—the Blitar Rebellion in Java (February 1945) and the Burmese National Army Uprising (March 1945)—are also examples of attempts to undermine and overthrow the Japanese empire by colonial nationalists who had been collaborating with Japan, determined to bet themselves. These experiences as remembered by Japanese occupiers tell us that the dissolution of the Japanese empire should be portrayed as the result of Japan not only being overpowered by superior Allied military forces, but also being deeply shaken by the strong resistance of colonial nationalists, both physically (by armed rebellions and refusal to collaborate) and ideologically (by demanding national sovereignty and equality).

OVERCOME BY WESTERN MODERNITY

Among the many narratives regarding the last days of the Occupation, an essay written by the philosopher Miki Kiyoshi (1943) after his return from the Philippines could be singled out. It discussed the gap between the “idealism in the rear [homeland/Japan]” and the “reality at the front [Southeast Asia],” as well as “the practicality of thought.”

The Japanese sent to Southeast Asia in general had all refuted Western colonialism and white supremacy, criticizing modernity, its material culture, universalism, and liberalism. They thought they could offer an “Asianism” based on the “Japan Spirit” (Nippon Seishin) as an ideological alternative, urging the people of the colonized countries to transform themselves accordingly. These notions were, Miki suggested, merely inventions of “idealism in the rear.” The “reality at the front” ultimately exposed the contradiction that contemporary Japan relied too much on Western modernity to deny it and was bound too much by Western racism to refute it. There was also the difficulty of logically explaining the Japanese concepts of patriarchal Asianism and spiritualism to the occupied peoples.

When Miki’s doubts are laid over his “practicability of ideas” regarding the failures the Japanese experienced during their colonial moment in Southeast Asia, a motif emerges indicating that it was not so much “they” in Southeast Asia but rather “we” in Japan who had to change. And that is what the Japanese did very quickly and shortly after the war. The postwar Japanese sealed off the “Japan Spirit” they once tried to impose on Southeast Asia and started over again, by buying into Western modernity, lock, stock and barrel. Miki’s reflections suggest that the seeds of change were getting ready to germinate in the garden of occupier-occupied relations even before the end of the war. One may then wonder if the Japanese Occupation is a story not so much about Japan liberating Southeast Asia, but about the Japanese themselves being liberated from the gridlock imposed by their own imperial bondage.

NOTES

- 1 Harry Benda, *The Crescent and the Rising Sun: Indonesian Islam under the Japanese Occupation 1942–45* (Hague: Van Hoeve Ltd., 1958).
- 2 Josef Silverstein, ed., *Southeast Asia in World War II: Four Essays* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1966).
- 3 David Joel Steinberg, ed., *In Search of Southeast Asia: A Modern History* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971).
- 4 Alfred W. McCoy, ed., *Southeast Asia under Japanese Occupation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, Southeast Asia Studies Monograph Series, 1980).
- 5 Aiko Kurasawa, *Transformation of Rural Java under Japanese Occupation* [Nihon Senryō Ka no Jawa Nōson no Hen'yō] (Sōshisha, 1992).
- 6 Iwatake Teruhiko, *Economic Policy under the Southern Military Administration* [Nanpō Gunsei Ka no Keizai Shisaku]. 2 vols. (Kyūko Shoin. 1981). Also in the author's *Essays on the Southern Military Administration* [Nanpō Gunsei Ronshū]. (Gen'nando Shoten. 1989).
- 7 Bōei Kenkyūjo Senshi Bu, ed., *War History Series: Documentary Sources of the Southern Military Administration* [Senshi Sōsho Shiryōshu Nanpō no Gunsei] (Asagumo Shimbunsha, 1985).
- 8 Terasaki Hidenari, *Monologue of Shōwa Ten'nō* [Shōwa Ten'nō Dokuhakuroku] (Bunshun Bunko, 1995).
- 9 “Japan Center for Asian Historical Records,” <https://www.jacar.go.jp/english/>.
- 10 Ikehata Setsuho and Lydia N. Yu Jose, eds., *Philippines-Japan Relations* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2003).

- 11 FJOP, ed., *Interview Transcripts: Japanese Occupation of the Philippines* (Ryūkei Shosha). Forum for the Survey of Sources Concerning the Japanese Occupation of the Philippines [Nihon no Firipin Senryōki ni Kansuru Shiryō Chōsa Fōramu, hereafter cited as FJOP, 1994].
- 12 Aiko Kurasawa, ed., *Japanese Occupation in Southeast Asia's History* [Tōnan Ajia Shi no Naka no Nihon Senryō] (Waseda Daigaku Shuppanbu, 1997).
- 13 Sumio Hatano, *Pacific War and Japan's Asian Diplomacy* [Taiheiyō Sensō to Ajia Gaikō] (Tokyo Daigaku Shuppankai); Hiroaki Adachi, 2002. *Prewar Japan and Southeast Asia* [Senzen Ki Nihon to Tōnan Ajia] (Yoshikawa Kōbunkan); Kōsuke Kawanishi 2005. 'Empire' and 'Independence': Resonance of Independence Problems in 'Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere' ['Teikoku' to 'Dokuritsu': Dai Tōa Kyōei Ken ni Okeru Jishu Dokuritsu Mondai no Kyōshin] (Nenpō Nihon Gendaishi, No. 10. Gendai Shiryō Shuppan, 2005); Kōsuke Kawanishi, *Expansion and Fall of Japanese Empire: Historical Development toward 'Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere'* [Teikoku Nihon no Kakuchō to Hōkai: 'Dai Tōa Kyōei Ken' eno Rekishiteki Tenkai] (Hosei Daigaku Shuppankyoku, 2012).
- 14 Satoshi Nakano, *The Occupation of Southeast Asia and the Japanese* [Tōnan Ajia Senryō to Nihonjin] (Iwanami Shoten, 2012).
- 15 Gunjishi Gakkai, ed., *Imperial General Headquarters Army Department War Planning and Management Detail's Classified Journal of the War* [Daihon'ei Rikugunbu Sensō Shidō Han Kimitasu Sensō Nisshi], 2 vols. (Kinseisha, 1998).
- 16 Ishii Akiho, *Diary of the Southern Military Administration* [Nanpō Gunsei Nikki]. NID (Bunko-Itaku 1957) 96. Selected entries from the diary appear in Bōeikenkyūjo (1985). Upon collation, the latter will be cited when the author finds that both texts are identical enough. Also in Ishii Akiho, *Diary of Col. Ishii Akiho* [Ishii Akiho Taisa Nikki Sono Ichi], vol. 1 (NID, Nansei-Zenpan

- 1960) 39. This document is a facsimile of the original diary Ishii wrote from 27 November 1941 to 30 May 1942.
- 17 Hirofumi Hayashi, *Singapore Sook Ching* [Shingapōru Kakyō Shukusei] (Kōbunken, 2007).
 - 18 Shūdan Hōdōbu Watari, ed., *The 14th Army Propaganda Corps Documentary Sources of Propaganda Operations* [Dai 14 Gun Gun Senden Han Senden Kōsaku Shiryō Shū], vol. 1 (Ryūkei Shosha, 1996).
 - 19 Satoshi Nakano, “Appeasement and Coercion,” in *Philippines under Japan: Occupation Policy and Reaction*, ed. Setsuho Ikehata and Ricardo T. Jose (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1999).
 - 20 Hidemi Kon, “Study on Humanity in Miki Kiyoshi [Miki Kiyoshi ni okeru Ningen no Kenkyū]” *Shinchō*, 47, no. 2, (February 1950).
 - 21 Ricardo T. Jose, “Test of Wills: Diplomacy between Japan and the Laurel Government,” in *Philippines-Japan Relations*, ed. Setsuho Ikehata and Lydia N. Yu Jose (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2003).

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