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THE POLITICS OF COLLABORATION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE DYNAMICS AND INTERACTIONS BETWEEN THE JAPANESE MILITARY ADMINISTRATION AND LOCAL CHINESE COMMUNITIES IN HONG KONG AND SINGAPORE DURING WORLD WAR II

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Keywords:  collaboration, Hong Kong, Singapore, WWII

The collaboration that occurred between the Japanese military administration and local communities during World War II was arguably a hallmark in the history of the Empire of Japan. This dissertation aims to address one primary research question:

Which factors shaped and can explain the dynamics and interactions between the Japanese military administration and the local Chinese elites and masses in WWII Hong Kong and Singapore?

To address this question thoroughly, this dissertation also addresses the following sub-questions throughout its examination of wartime collaboration in Hong Kong and Singapore:

a. What was the meaning of the term collaboration for the local Chinese community in Hong Kong?

b. Did the Japanese military administrations in Hong Kong and Singapore receive the support from the local elites and masses necessary for the implementation of their political, economic, and social policies? If not, why?

c. What have been the legacies or lasting impacts of Japanese policies towards Chinese elites and management at the district level?

d. Was the Japanese military administration in Hong Kong less harsh and more willing to satisfy the requests of the local Chinese community than was the administration in Singapore? If so, did this increase the impetus for collaboration in Hong Kong?

A central concern of this dissertation is how the Chinese of Hong Kong adapted to living under a foreign, usually repressive regime. Contrary to conventional wisdom, this dissertation argues that when compared to Singapore under Japanese occupation, Hong Kong under Japanese occupation was not such a harsh or poor place. To support this argument, it traces the historical roots of the relationship between the Hong Kong Chinese elites and the Japanese military government to demonstrate that the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong was not simply a function of Japanese imperialism. Rather, it was as much a function of the collaboration of local people, who cooperated with the Japanese to build the new economic, social, and political infrastructure.

This dissertation aims to probe the processes by which such collaboration arose, how the Japanese elicited cooperation, and why and how the local Chinese community responded to Japanese overtures. This examination is based on the assumptions that all parties had limited or no knowledge regarding the extent of the Japanese invasion and subsequent occupation or of the complex nature of the intersection between Chinese and Japanese interests in Hong Kong. In accordance with this perspective, this dissertation examines case studies at both the national and local district level in Hong Kong and compares them with similar cases in Singapore.

The dissertation firstly argues that although Japanese rule was brief, Japan’s successful invasion destroyed the myth of the invincibility of the British Empire in Hong Kong. The clock could not be turned back; the nature of British rule after the war could not be the same as it had been before the war. The Hong Kong population’s refusal to be entirely dominated by a foreign ruler was a significant legacy of several Japanese policies and actions during the occupation. First, the Japanese administration had appointed more Chinese into the “central administration of the colony than the British had ever done”, which had granted the Chinese greater representation, regardless of the motives of the Japanese for doing so. Second, the Japanese supplemented this greater representation by delegating certain responsibilities to the Chinese representatives, which had conferred a measure of prestige upon even the humbler officials. Third, the Japanese provided for representation at the local level by creating the District Bureaux and ward system, thus endowing the colony with an entirely new infrastructure of local government. Fourth, unlike the British, the Japanese went to great lengths to publicize and explain their policies and the nature of their bureaucracy, the latter of which was remarkably adaptable and suitable for the situation in Hong Kong.

In addition, the dissertation argues that the Japanese invaded both territories for the same purpose—ensuring the security and supporting the economy of Japan—before subsequently installing a similar military administration in both territories. However, the nature of the administration in each colony had differing political, economic, and social impacts on these territories that indelibly affected their later development.

At last, this dissertation used the term collaborator to refer to one who willingly assists the enemies of his or her state in conducting military operations against his or her state or in implementing policies after gaining control of the state. It endeavored to explain the seeming readiness with which the Hong Kong populace accepted Japanese occupation and engaged in cooperation with the Japanese military administration. In the course of doing so, it demonstrated the manner in which the Japanese in Hong Kong simultaneously assumed the roles of agents of socioeconomic change and oppressors, creating a partnership based on “mutual dependence and advantage”. Having collaborated with British colonialists before the war, it likely appeared rational to continue collaborating with the new colonialists—the Japanese—particularly as most felt only a diffuse loyalty to either an emerging entity called “China” or the village or region that they had left behind many years ago. Therefore, using the term “collaborators” to denote the local elites who had cooperated with the Japanese occupiers is disingenuous.

References
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