SOUTHEAST ASIA UNDER JAPANESE OCCUPATION

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INTRODUCTION

The Historiography of World War II

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The Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia during World War II has become one of the most closely studied periods of the region's history. Since the late 1940s a considerable number of doctoral dissertations, journal articles and monographs have appeared analyzing the events of the war years from local, national and regional perspectives. The complexity of Southeast Asia's modern history has generally precluded the development of the neatly defined historical "problems" characteristic of undergraduate readings on Europe or America; and the question of the war's lasting political impact on Southeast Asian politics is one of the few to attract a sufficient diversity and intensity of study to achieve the status of such a "problem." The literature on the wartime period has developed to the point that all of the region's major states have been studied, and, in several areas, differing schools of interpretation have emerged.

In contrast to the rapid rise in sheer volume of publication, the process of historiographic interpretation of the Japanese occupation period has proceeded at a rather slow pace. During the quarter century which has followed the 1953 publication of Willard Elsbree's pioneering treatise on Japanese policy toward the region's nationalist movements, there has been near universal agreement among Western and many national scholars that the war initiated a major social and political transformation in Southeast Asia. There has been considerable debate on ancillary questions such as the nature of Japanese policy or the implications of indigenous responses, but no substantive dissent from a central thesis that the Japanese occupation period fundamentally altered the structure of the region's history and the quality of its political life.

In the introduction to his 1953 volume, Elsbree carefully defined four questions which he considered basic to an analysis of the occupation's impact on Southeast Asian nationalism, two of which have continued to define the fundamental parameters of the war's historiography. In response to his first question as to whether the occupation had induced major political change, Elsbree offered an answer which has never been seriously challenged:

All of these developments, in conjunction with the overthrow of the old colonial system and the disruption of life occasioned by the war, were catalytic agents in the dissolution of the old order; they were paving the way for the construction of a modern state.
Although Elsbree was critical of occupation in many respects, he denied, in answering his second question, that Japanese policy had consciously employed "divide and rule" tactics. The minority-majority ethnic conflicts and political instability which had characterized the first years of independence in much of the region were attributable to the normal tensions of nation building and did not "stem from any diabolical artfulness in setting group against group" on the part of Japanese wartime administrators. Elsbree, in fact, emphasized the powerful unifying effect that Japanese policy had on the formation of Indonesian national consciousness, and in so doing foreshadowed the work of a later generation of scholars.

Elsbree's work was, however, soon superseded by that of Harry Benda, an historian whose influential publications dealt with the war's impact on Java, Indonesia and the whole of Southeast Asia. In his work on Japanese Islamic policy in Java, Benda, disagreeing with Elsbree, argued that the Japanese did in fact pursue a policy of "divide and rule," and put forward an argument which is still a source of continuing controversy. Moreover, while affirming Elsbree's ideas on the lasting political impact of the war, Benda radically redefined the question and interpreted it with a convincing originality that gradually won him a wide following among Southeast Asian area specialists.

Benda developed his ideas on the historiography of the war during the 1950s and early 1960s when the field of Southeast Asian Studies was undergoing a rapid development in the United States. There was then a trend by leading scholars of the region, among whose number Benda soon came to be counted, to identify communalities of experience, and thereby give academic coherence to a region of at least superficial diversity — in short, to establish the definition that the eight nations of Southeast Asia were indeed just that. "Southeast Asia." Benda was perhaps the most articulate exponent of this delineation, and the introduction to his *A History of Modern Southeast Asia* begins:

> While the collective concept of "Southeast Asia" was long familiar in Chinese and Japanese usage as Nanyang and Nampo (the region of the Southern Seas), it is of very recent vintage as far as Westerners are concerned. In all likelihood, it only emerged during the closing stages of the Second World War with the creation of a Southeast Asian Command. Once born, however, the concept rapidly gained currency until the many-faceted political crisis of the mid-twentieth century turned it into an all too familiar collectivity. That crisis, in turn, has brought in its wake a fast-growing scholarly awareness of the significance of an area that had received little academic attention in prewar years.

Benda initially developed his ideas on the importance of the Japanese occupation period as a Japanese prisoner-of-war on Java, and they first saw light in his Cornell University doctoral dissertation on Japanese Islamic policy in Indonesia, later published as The Crescent and the Rising Sun. An article based on the dissertation appearing in a 1956 issue of *Far Eastern Quarterly* began with this sentence: "As elsewhere in Southeast Asia, the Japanese occupation was a decisive factor in the shaping of political developments in Indonesia in 1945."

In his influential article, "The Structure of Southeast Asian History," published in 1962, one can detect the confluence of Benda's two scholarly concerns — the rôle of the region in the larger subsuming world and events in Japan, India, China, and the region's own historiography, paralleling similar developments in the historiography of the "common European colonial possessions, that is, the European colonies in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Middle East." His own study, however, was of "a kind of region — fragmented, with an array of political and ethnic elements of Southeast Asia, a region of the very same "ephemeral" significance as Southeast Asia as a whole."

During World War II, Benda's traveling experience was not so "ephemeral" as he supposed.

I would like to conclude by recounting a historical anecdot of my own. In my book, *Southeast Asia in the Twentieth Century: From Colonialism to Independence, 1919-1968*, the present historian of Southeast Asia, in my opinion, I have in all likelihood the look of the great historian, and my language is designed to make this impression.

In his last article, and in an essay on the wartime period's political evolution, dealing with the developments of the period, I have concluded:
concerns -- the impact of the Japanese occupation and the academic coherence of the region. Benda conceded "the difficulty, or even the impossibility of subsuming Southeast Asia in terms of an integral civilization, like those of India, China..." but went on to argue that the structure of the region's history, particularly during the modern imperial era, revealed certain unifying similarities of experience. Admitting a diversity of cultural and historical experience in earlier centuries, Benda argued, with some qualifications, that the advent of Western colonialism imposed, for the first time, a certain coherence on Southeast Asia: "Westernization has nonetheless provided a kind of intrinsic unity which has tended to de-emphasize some of the major historical differences between the Indianized, Sinicized and Philippine segments of Southeast Asia." The unifying impact of imperial rule was muted, however, by the imposition of "sharply delineated and jealously maintained" colonial frontiers which rendered Southeast Asia's unity, in a certain sense, "ephemeral."  

During World War II the Japanese occupied virtually the entire expanse of what came to be known as "Southeast Asia," and gave the region a common historical experience which, Benda argued, was also a major turning point in its history:

I would...plead that the Japanese interregnum be provisionally accorded the status of a distinct historical epoch in Southeast Asian history. I disagree with the almost generally prevailing notion that the interregnum was no more than a superficial (because brief) episode which can be conveniently relegated to a preface to present-day Southeast Asia. ...It is indeed no exaggeration to say that without the Japanese interlude, the balance between continuity and change in contemporary Southeast Asia might still be conceivably weighted in favor of continuity, or at best a more gradual evolutionary change. Japanese rule, moreover, was not merely a period of military occupation. In many ways, the Japanese unwittingly or unwittingly interfered in all aspects of Southeast Asian life... If only as a catalyst, then, the last stage of foreign domination fully deserves -- in spite of great gaps in available documentation -- careful attention as a significant stage in the history of Southeast Asia.

In his last comprehensive attempt to address himself to this question, Benda, in an essay published in 1969, affirmed his belief in the significance of the wartime period and isolated one element in the region's political transformation, dealt with by implication in earlier works, as the most essential:

The mobilization of youth was without a doubt the most radical innovation wrought by the Japanese in wartime Southeast Asia. Where in colonial times upward social mobility had been limited to those of aristocratic birth or those with...education, the ranks of the new elite were open to young people with the right elan and daring, with organizational skills...

Although Benda had still complained in 1962 of the "prevailing notion" which attached little significance to the occupation period, within the decade there was a decisive turn in scholarly opinion towards an acceptance of his views. In the introduction to a collection of essays on the region's wartime history published in 1966, under Benda's general editorship, Josef Silverstein concluded:

The Japanese occupation was indeed a "watershed" for modern political development in most Southeast Asian countries. There are several aspects of current Southeast Asian politics which have their roots in the war period. The problem of leadership in several of the countries is one. The war disrupted the pattern of authority established by the colonial powers to govern the nation; the various subleaders -- traditional, hereditary, and elected -- all lost their hold upon their followers in the confusion of the war. Into this void stepped many young, energetic, and patriotic local leaders who, with relatively little or no experience, assumed authority.

The accompanying articles all emphasized the significance and lasting consequences of the Japanese occupation on the society under study: Anderson's essay on Indonesia argued for a positive interpretation of the occupation's impact on the development of nationalism; Guyot's history of the Burma Independence Army showed how this Japanese-sponsored, armed political movement became established as a force in Burmese society; similarly, Steinberg's analysis of the wartime collaboration by the Filipino elite concluded that "the postwar dishonesty, bribery, nepotism, and corruption which has plagued Philippine life is due to the oligarchy's scramble back upon power." 10

Succeeding work on Java further developed the idea that wartime disruption and, in certain particulars, Japanese occupation policy was of critical significance for the development of Indonesian nationalism and the colony's postwar liberation from the Dutch. 11 With the publication of In Search of Southeast Asia in 1972, Benda's interpretation of the occupation received the imprimatur of general scholarly acceptance. In the introduction to the volume's section on the postwar period, the committee of six leading historians stated: 12

The war years constituted an important break in the historical continuum, as ideas, institutions and people held in check by the colonial governments were liberated. World War II greatly accelerated the process of change and the fruition of nationalism in Southeast Asia. During and immediately after the war, a new generation of Southeast Asians gained power. Intent on freeing their societies and leading them toward a new era, these nationalists did not intend to surrender their newly achieved authority. In that sense, the Japanese claims of 'a new dawn for Asia' and an 'Asia for the Asians' were true.

The sections following on the individual countries of the region placed considerable emphasis on the impact, both negative and positive, of the Japanese interregnum on their postwar histories.

Subsequent publications have supported the Benda transformation thesis. A study of the occupation period in Vietnam by Truong Bui Lam, published in 1973, quibbled with Benda's use of the term "interregnum" and disputed some of his comparative points, but concluded by affirming the argument. 13 Most recently, a Thai historian has argued that the wartime years had a lasting impact on the quality of Thai political life, a thesis that even Benda in his most expansive voice had never ventured to offer. 14 The transformation thesis has begun to find a wider audience as well. Using the writing of Benda and others as an historical benchmark of regional coherence, Evelyn Colbert, a senior U.S. State Department official, has recently published an analysis of international diplomacy concluding on such broad force of maximum interpretation is an opportune time for a new evaluation of the transformation thesis and the impact of World War II.

What emerges from a revision of the transformation thesis? The image of the war's effect ranging from Korea, Japan, Thailand and the Philippines, Java, Malaya emphasizes with ethnic Malay collaboration, the wartime transformation thesis. W. W. Keane, the Chinese community, Chana, the negative where Asia is not is the war significantly with far from propitious provided an opportunity for substantial forward movement in the middle of wartime Indochina and the Philippines. Moving towards the conclusion of elite politics, Guyot and Silverstein conclude that international political elite.

In opposition to these elite, these essays provide evidence for what might otherwise be considered. -- Taylor -- they demonstrate that the already influential McCoy effect point-based political elite.
intellectual diplomacy in Southeast Asia during the 1941-1956 period, focusing on such broad forces as neutralism, communism and democracy. With this maximum interpretation of the wartime period at the peak of its influence, it is an opportune time for a critical re-examination.

**Intellectual Parricide/Filial Piety**

The present volume, although edited by one of Harry Benda's students and published in the monograph series of which he was for many years general editor, is neither an act of intellectual parricide nor filial piety. It is rather an attempt by nine historians of Southeast Asia and Papua New Guinea to reassess the most fundamental of the theses on the wartime period posed by Benda and like-minded specialists -- the argument that the war was not simply a transition from colonialism to independence but did in fact constitute a fundamental transformation in the region's political history. Vague reservations about the certainty of the total transformation thesis were first raised in discussions involving several contributors to this volume held at the Department of Pacific and Southeast Asian History, Australian National University, in late 1977. Reservations became serious doubts in the course of a panel presentation of four of these essays at the 1978 meeting of the Asian Studies Association of Australia. It was then decided that a convincing challenge to the transformation thesis would require detailed analyses of the conduct and impact of World War II in each of the major nations of Southeast Asia.

What emerges from a reading of these nine essays is neither a summary dismissal of the transformation thesis nor an overall confirmation of its basic tenets. The image of the war's uniform and lasting impact on the whole of Southeast Asia, presented by the transformation school, yields to a wider spectrum of effect ranging from the profound in Indonesia to the nearly insignificant in Thailand and the Philippines.

Occupying a middle ground are the essays on Papua New Guinea, Burma, Vietnam, and Malaya. Yoji Akashi's analysis of wartime Malaya emphasizes the positive aspects of Japanese political relations with ethnic Malay collaborators to make an argument sympathetic to the transformation thesis. Written, in contrast, from the perspective of the Malayan-Chinese community, Cheah Boon Kheng's interpretation of the same events sees the negative where Akashi sees the positive, but nonetheless concludes that the war significantly altered postwar Malaysian politics, albeit for different reasons and with far less enthusiasm for the result. Finding that the war provided an opportunity for established political forces in Vietnam to make substantial forward movement towards independence, David Marr's interpretation of wartime Indochina occupies an approximate centerpoint in the spectrum.

Moving towards the continuity side of the range, Robert Taylor's interpretation of elite politics in wartime and postwar Burma challenges earlier work by Guyot and Silverstein which argued that the war had fostered a new Burmese political elite.

In opposition to the transformation school's argument that the war created new elites, these essays, with the exception of those on Indonesia, provide evidence for what might be called an elite continuity thesis. Three of the contributors -- Taylor on Burma, Marr on Vietnam and McCoy on the Philippines -- demonstrate that the political elites which emerged from the war years were already influential in the prewar decade. In making this case both Taylor and McCoy effect point-by-point refutations of earlier accounts of wartime Burmese and Philippine political history -- interpretations which had in fact provided
the main evidence for the "new elite" thesis. By placing the war in a broader time frame, reaching back into the 1930s and forward to the 1950s, the three accounts included here show clearly that what appears, in the narrow context of the 1942-45 period, to be new political leadership was in reality the response of distinct social groups to changed political circumstance, creating the illusion but not the substance of change. These observations are, moreover, a significant contribution towards our understanding of Southeast Asian elites and the social bases of political power in the region. Research into the social composition and continuity of elites in Southeast Asia is, at least in comparison to that being done in Western Europe, in its infancy, and these essays add to our knowledge by providing us with analyses that show an impressive elite resilience in the face of traumatic social disruption and major political upheaval.

The elites of Thailand, the Philippines, and Malaya as depicted by Cheah Boon Kheng, made brilliant transitions -- from Western empires to Japanese Cosperestry Sphere and back to Western rule -- with only minimal concession to their indigenous constituencies or alien patrons. While the Thai elite, by virtue of their country's relative independence, were able to mollify alien protectors by nominal changes in political symbols and government personnel, Filipino and Malay elites faced serious threats to their political survival at the hands of a restored Western colonialism initially inclined to punish their wartime dalliance with the Japanese. But in both cases the overarching imperative of stability and reconstruction forced the colonial regimes to abandon schemes for social experimentation and restore the prewar elites to power.

While the studies of Malaya, Thailand and the Philippines demonstrate the survival of entrenched elites, the essays on Vietnam and Burma demonstrate how established nationalist elites, denied office in the prewar era, used wartime dislocations to seize power. Both developments were perhaps innovative and significant in the context of colonial politics, but neither constituted social or political change for Burmese and Vietnamese societies. In both countries anti-colonial movements had been the main focus of indigenous political concerns for several decades, and the nationalist leadership that had emerged to command these movements had evolved from existing social elites and won a widespread political mandate for the seizure of power. That they did in fact take power in the postwar years simply affirmed the mandate that the anti-colonial elites had earned before the outbreak of war. This argument can, at least in part, be applied as well to Java and Sumatra where much of the political direction of the period was provided by established nationalist elites. There is ample evidence to indicate that in at least five of the six major Southeast Asian nations examined here the indigenous elite emerged from the war in much the same position as they had been in the prewar decade -- that is, at the epicenter of their nations' futures. In three of these five cases the war no doubt advanced the actual date that the regime changed from colonial to national, but in no case did it alter a more fundamental factor -- who would take power when it was ultimately transferred.

Even in retrospect it seems somewhat improbable that an event of such magnitude as the war could have had such a transitory impact on a region that felt so profoundly the violence of its major battles and the weight of its occupying armies. But that apparently is the case. The contributors to this volume put forward a range of reasons as to why the war and Japanese occupation made so little difference -- New Guinea was not yet significant; in Cheah Boon Kheng's case, communal leaders for prewar Japanese officials to the Philippines entrenched a new thing, than in the past.

Of great moment to those with little importance to the war was their loyalty to the Japanese and a number switched to their side. By the end of the war, many of the national elites were in a situation that they had not been for some time as a variety of armed resistance or even collaboration with the Japanese. Southeast Asian elites studied their own political survival and made some kind of decision for survival or higher quality of living.

The weight of these arguments is that the cycle of established indigenous elites, denied office in Burma and the Philippines, is such that it seems that in Southeast Asia elites were more or less Lacking convincing evidence of substantial social or cultural transformation, economic innovations, or even a political or social reform movement, the argument of those who would make the position untenable.

Despite differences in the capacity of Southeast Asian leaders to deal with the wartime drama, their partial sympathies with the war, and their sympathies with the real initiators of political change; the Japanese, not the revanchist Thai forces in Thailand and the Philip pinos, adroitly to further their own interests as the Japanese military confronted an unwilling and loyal to America, the Japanese in wartime, but because it served...
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event of such magni- on a region that felt weight of its occup- ibutors to this volume anese occupation made so little difference -- Hank Nelson found that national consciousness in Papua New Guinea was not yet acute enough for the war to take on a particular significance; in Cheah Boon Kheng’s Malaya, competition between Malay and Chinese communal leaders for political power reduced the war to opportunity and Japanese officials to the status of pawns; and in Burma, Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines entrenched political elites emerged from the war stronger, if anything, than in the past.

Of great moment to the major combatants, wartime allegiance was a matter of little importance to the Southeast Asian wartime leaders. Some proclaimed their loyalty to the Western Allies, others transferred it to the Japanese, and a number switched sides once or several times during the war. While some of the national elites, particularly their younger components, were caught up in momentary passions of loyalty to a particular side, most regarded the war as a variety of armed diplomacy and approached it with an appropriate dispersion or even cynicism. Remaining pragmatists about the war’s outcome, Southeast Asian elites studied developments assiduously, trying (1) to assure their own political survival, and (2) to advance the cause of whatever national, factional or communal group they were leading. In most cases, Western and Japanese wartime ideology was secondary in importance to questions of elite survival or higher questions of national independence.

The weight of these arguments would seem, therefore, to controvert the Benda-Silberstein thesis that the war fostered new elites who rose to displace established indigenous leadership. With the “new elites” thesis challenged in Burma and the Philippines and a counter thesis argued for three other countries, it seems that, rather than being transformed by the war, the composition of Southeast Asian elites demonstrated a remarkable continuity of development. Lack of compelling evidence for other types of lasting and substantive change -- cultural transformations, marked change in mass political values or significant economic innovations -- there is little reason to believe that the war produced a political or social transformation. The “new elites” thesis was the key argument of those who advocated the transformation idea, and its loss makes that position untenable.

Despite differences in various points, all the essays in this collection see Southeast Asian leaders, colonized or independent, as the central actors in the wartime drama. Even in the Indonesian essays, which are at least partially sympathetic to the Benda school, indigenous elites stand out as the real initiators of political change, and it was they who manipulated the Japanese, not the reverse as Benda had argued. Highlighted in the essays on Thailand and the Philippines, the region’s elites manipulated the Japanese adroitly to further their own political ends in a manner that left the Japanese military confused or vengeful but rarely in command of the situation. The Japanese reciprocated with force and countermanipulation, but seemed to lack the finesse of the region’s leadership and rarely achieved their ends. Even in Malaya, where the war time occupation unleashed communal antagonisms that have yet to be restrained, it is clear from both the Yoji Akashi and Cheah Boon Kheng accounts that neither the Malay nor Chinese leadership were victims of Japanese manipulation but instead actively sought the opportunity for communal confrontation, leaving the Japanese unwitting accomplices or ineffective arbiters. In the Philippines, where so much of the elite remained loyal to America, they did so not out of some politically adolescent sentiment but because it served their understanding of their basic interests. Political
response varied enormously throughout the region but all shared common origins -- autonomous elite perceptions of local or global political change and an independent determination of how to advance their particular cause in the midst of the wartime upheaval.

It would appear then, for the moment, the transformation thesis stands in Indonesia, the area that both Benda and Elsbree studied closely, and, with some qualification, in Malaya. But the broader implications for the whole of Southeast Asia -- argued by Benda, Steinberg and Silverstein -- would appear to have been controverted. With the exception of Batson on Thailand, all the contributors agree that the war was an event of near cataclysmic proportions in its armed violence and political disruption. But only in Malaya and Indonesia did the disaster achieve a configuration of lasting political consequence. In Burma, the Philippines, Papua New Guinea, and, to a limited extent, Vietnam, the war's violence left little more than a trail of physical destruction, such as might follow in the wake of a natural, not political, upheaval -- rather like the villages of bamboo houses toppled by a strong tropical typhoon in insular Southeast Asia, utterly flattened but quickly reassembled.

The historiography of the war has moved, or so it appears in retrospect, in rather slow turns of about a decade in length -- nearly ten years between Elsbree's first statement and Benda's "Structure of Southeast Asian History;" almost another ten for the general acceptance of Benda's thesis epitomized by the authors of In Search of Southeast Asia; and now, in somewhat less time, those revisionist explorations.

New Directions for Research

If these contributors are correct in their overall assessment that the war did not foster a political transformation, then at least two new directions for research might be indicated. Those trying to locate major events that did produce a "transformation" in the structure of Southeast Asia's history will have to move backward in time to at least the nineteenth century when basic political, social and economic parameters were established. One obvious question of particular significance to emerge from these studies involves the quality and character of national elites in modern Southeast Asia. The continuity in development of modern political elites has been a major focus of research in Thailand and the Philippines, and other areas might profit from a parallel inquiry.

Those interested in the war and Japanese occupation per se will have to frame new kinds of historical questions. Instead of asking how the war transformed the region, the question could be reversed to ask why an event of such magnitude was of so little lasting impact. Japan's management of the region's export economies, touched on in the Marr and Batson essays, is one important topic that has yet to be studied. At the outbreak of World War II, Southeast Asia had one of the most highly developed export sectors in the Third World, and each of these colonies was closely integrated into the economy of its respective Western metropole. Faced with a nearly insurmountable problem of economic reintegration after its occupation, Japan initially divided the export sector as war spoils and later devolved much of it to a subsistence level -- decisions that permanently alienated many of the region's non-Western merchants and commercial farmers from the Japanese.

Moving beyond the elite, a more successful attempt to assay mass responses has been done largely by specialists in Japanese programmed contacts with local groups, leaflets, radio broadcasts, ephemeral media, and their spread and palpable Japanese forced labor impressment, and slaughter of the variety that the author suggests a balanced perspective between these contacts, in-depth local studies may be the key.

Even at the level of Japan, the apparent dearth of detailed study. Limited experience of officer cadres, networking relations between, local self-sufficiency by the war years. If such research had been made between wartime and postwar years, the significance of this will be measured.

If the fundamental argument of this article does not transform the region, perhaps it has obviously lessened from a recent frontier of much importance in the history of "impact" and "response" studies. The aspects of Japanese policy, prewar and military relations, etc. about the Japanese war effort, has been completed, such work will be followed by operations, and will allow one to proceed at a much higher level of investigation.

Finally, there remains an obvious and visible impact of the war on Western and, it may be, even more obvious from Taylor's discussion of colonial officials still in the Philippines, a postwar years. In the recent history of the country, interest in the history of the region's political history and the psychological impact of the war on the confidence and rule.

Taking one of the key tenets of the dead, its head provides us with a framework of the problem. In their account of the indigenous society several years after the shock of sudden European domination and the Japanese mass id of innate racial superior...
Moving beyond the elite, a more broadly focused kind of analysis might be attempted to assay mass response to Japanese occupation policy. To date this has been done largely by speculative content analysis of certain types of Japanese programmed contact with the masses -- education, propaganda, youth groups, leaflets, radio broadcasts, etc. These are for the most part rather ephemeral media, and their impact may have paled in comparison with more widespread and palpable Japanese efforts -- physical abuse, food confiscations, forced labor impressment, mass incarcerations and staged spectacles of mass slaughter of the variety that McCoy and Cheah Boon Kheng discuss. To achieve a balanced perspective between these two contradictory elements of Japanese contacts, in-depth local studies of selected communities might be undertaken.

Even at the level of Japanese relations with the region's elite there is a dearth of detailed study. Outside the very limited area of Japanese military training of officer cadres, there is almost no close, documented study of working relations between Japanese administrators and nationalist elite during the war years. If such research were undertaken, comparisons could then be made between wartime and prewar administrations to determine what, if any, were the significance of these changes.

If the fundamental argument of this volume is correct and the occupation did not transform the region, then the need for study of these three years is obviously lessened from a Southeast Asian perspective. While the war was an experience of questionable significance for the region, it was no doubt of major importance in the history of modern Japan. Unlike the large number of "impact" and "response" studies done to date, parallel examination of most aspects of Japanese policy -- economic management, social policy, civil-military relations, etc. -- has yet to be undertaken for what it tells us about the Japanese war effort and the society behind that effort. Once completed, such work will give us a far clearer perspective of Japanese operations, and will allow the study of the war's impact on Southeast Asia to proceed at a much higher level of analysis.

Finally, there remains an obvious, but no longer fashionable, question -- the impact of the war on Western colonial officials in Southeast Asia. As is obvious from Taylor's discussion of postwar Burma, the attitudes and decisions of colonial officials still played a key role in shaping events in the war and postwar years. In the recent rush for an indigenous or autonomous Southeast Asian history, interest in the colonials, dominant in much of prewar scholarship, has faded to the point that an imbalance has developed in the writing of the region's political history. To date no scholar has seriously examined the psychological impact of military defeat and prolonged wartime incarceration on the confidence and capacity of European colonials to maintain their rule.

Taking one of the key tenets of the transformation school and standing it on its head provides us with a convenient starting point for an examination of the problem. In their accounts of the Japanese occupation and its impact on indigenous society several transformation school writers -- Anderson on Java, Gayot on Burma and Benda on the whole of the region -- have argued that the shock of sudden European military defeat in 1942 and the dramatic "kabuki" style of Japanese mass ideological mobilization, based in part on an anti-white racism, shattered what Anderson has called the white colonials' "mystique of innate racial superiority, near-magical efficiency." If, as Taylor
demonstrates in his rebuttal of the "white man mystique" thesis for Burma, the idea is a dubious one when applied to the region's indigenous populations, it may however have considerable validity for the white colonial. While Burmans and Indonesians may or may not have believed in the white man's innate superiority, the British and Dutch certainly did. If the war shattered the white man's mystique for anyone, it was for the white colonial themselves. Emerging from humiliating military defeats and three years of harsh incarceration at the hands of an Asian nation, the Europeans could no longer be quite so confident in the preordained subservience of the native populations and their own natural right to rule.

Obscured in the documentary accounts of the region's postwar colonial politics, the white man's sudden loss of confidence is evident in Agnes Newton Keith's eloquent essays on colonial life in North Borneo. A "modern" American woman married to an Englishman employed as a senior forestry official in North Borneo, Mrs. Keith won an international literary reputation with four books on colonial life at the "outpost of Empire" spanning two decades from the placid years of the mid-1930s, through the trials of wartime concentration camps, to the first and most famous of her books, Land Below the Wind. painting a portrait of white-suited British colonial tending a native population who were characterized by their quaintness and an absolute incapacity for anything more complex than agriculture or market trading. One of the few Malays to achieve any identity beyond the superficially colorful is Arusap, her husband Harry's Murut houseboy. A man whose "dignity and beauty were unassailable," Arusap began work as "Tuan's boy" but over time became "an ambassador of good will to strange villages, a contact man between his master and worthy dignitaries, and a minister of the gospel of friendship and trust between white man and native."17

While "British Colonial life lived itself placidly and without confusion as British life should" in prewar North Borneo, all that came to an end with the arrival of the Japanese in January 1942. After the Japanese landed at Sandakan and a shot rang out as a European committed suicide, the Japanese troops "threatened and browbeat, bullied and frightened us." Describing the shock of expectant conquest and subjugation in her wartime memoirs, Three Came Home, later a Hollywood feature film, Mrs. Keith said: "But in all my life there is nothing for sheer mental terror to equal those forty-eight hours before the Japanese came."18

Although the hardship of three years under the Japanese at Kuching prison camp was muted by aid from the local Malay population, who like the Filipinos remained "loyal" to their colonialists, Mrs. Keith returned to North Borneo after the war with a new perception of Asia as hostile and threatening. Her account of the immediate postwar period, White Man Returns, written in 1950, is a bitter narrative full of foreboding which concludes with a clouded, agonized passage. While Mrs. Keith feels "affection and love" for "these strange people,...these curious, exciting other races," she is dismayed by the 'need to hate' growing in Asia which makes "the races stand with their backs against the wall, shouting -- KILL!"19 Writing in a more reflective vein a few years later, Mrs. Keith noted that the war had meant an end of the white man's doctrine "that we were a tiny privileged Occidental minority among an inferior Asian throng."20 Remarkably, Mrs. Keith felt these currents in a colonial backwater that became one of the last areas in Southeast Asia to win independence and achieved it with almost no anti-colonial agitation. For Mrs. Keith and the North Borneo experience of directly experienced by the lecturers who passed them on to the lecturers themselves as an unsullied autobiography. While Asian history could be written about the thick glass of Java was heralded, the off hours under the colonial trading system of Indonesia was called that day's work by its colonial trader. As a young man, wearing his long and hard hat, he turned and looked the eyes of the white man. Although he never knew what superior, Benda had a youth thought, not a white man seemed embittered and embittered. At the point nervously determined.

For Benda, Mrs. Keith's experiences in the war are expressed in a reflexive aggression of the rapid postwar period as a colonial nation equated Southern Europe as once represented in the world, and it did indeed
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and the North Borneo British colonials, whose views she often represented, the
experience of defeat and subjugation by Asians was an experience of sufficient
shock in and of itself to shatter their sense of racial superiority without
any pressure from the colonized.

What Agnes Keith felt so strongly in the placidity of North Borneo, Harry
Benda felt doubly in the midst of Java's upheavals. Among the most vivid of
the lectures he gave to Yale undergraduates, Benda annually turned from analy-
is to autobiography when he came to the World War II section in his Southeast
Asian history course. Gazing upward at the ceiling of the lecture hall through
his thick glasses, Benda recalled that the imminent arrival of the Japanese on
Java was heralded by the pedicab drivers studying katakana syllabary in their
off hours under the shade trees of Semarang where he was branch manager of a
colonial trading firm. Illustrating his argument that Japan's mass mobiliza-
tion of Indonesian youth marked the end of the colonial mystique, Benda re-
called that day on Java in 1942 when the teen-age son of the office sweeper
returned from his first Japanese-sponsored youth rally. Marching into the
office with none of the characteristic subservience of his father, the young
man, wearing his youth corps cap, strode up to Benda's desk to stare at him
long and hard. When Benda looked up, the youth, with a look of scorn in his
eyes, turned and marched away. In that stare Benda could see that the mystique
of the white man had died. But had it, or had it ever existed? While we will
never know what went through the young man's head as he looked at his father's
superior, Benda has told us what went through his. Regardless of what that
youth thought, for Benda, a white colonialist by accident, the mystique of the
white man seemed to be dead. During his later internment with the confused
and embittered Dutch, Benda noted their anger toward the traitorous Indone-
sians. At the end of the war he saw the vengeful Dutch pour out of the camps,
nervously determined to put the clock back to 1941.

For Benda, Mrs. Keith and a whole generation of white colonials, the war
shattered their universe. Their wartime humiliation and postwar confusion,
expressed in erratic colonial policies ranging from sudden retreat to assertive
aggression, obviously were not without consequence for Southeast Asia's
rapid postwar decolonization. Given the strength of the war's impact on the
colonial nations, it is only natural that Western historians should have
equated Southeast Asian indigenous reactions with their own. While the war
represented little more than a transition period for most of Southeast Asia,
it did indeed transform European attitudes and capabilities within the region.

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NOTES


2. Ibid., pp. 123-29, 162.


6. Ibid., p. 142.

7. Ibid., pp. 148-49.


18. Agnes Newton Keith, Three Came Home (Boston: Little Brown, 1946), pp. 4-5, 30-33.
