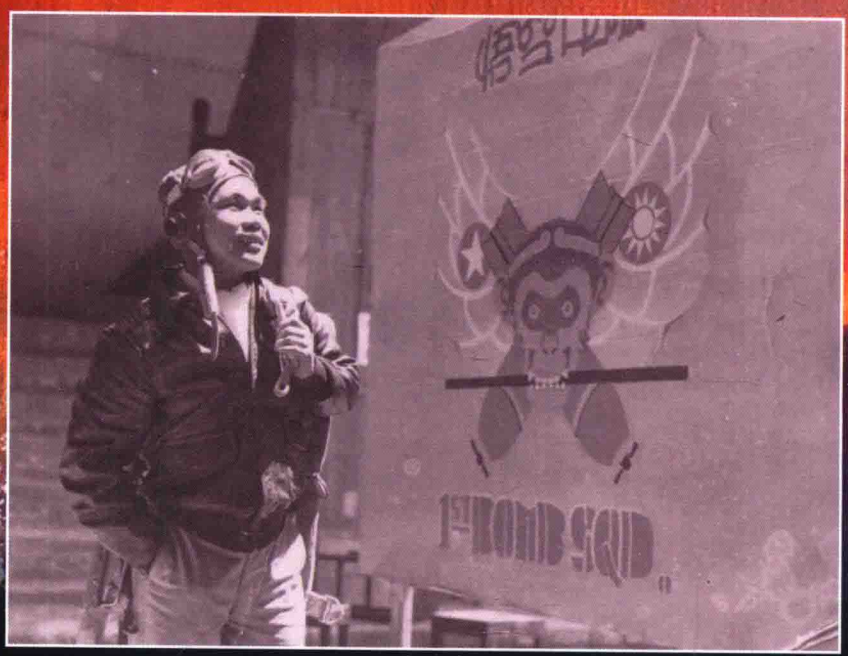
6 CHO Chinese Overseas

Diaspora at War

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



Ernest Koh

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by

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LEIDEN • BOSTON
2013

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

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Koh, Ernest.
Diaspora at war : the Chinese of Singapore between empire and nation, 1937-1945 / by Ernest Koh.
pages cm. — (Chinese overseas : history, literature, and society, ISSN 1876-3847 ; volume 6)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-90-04-17476-4 (hardback : acid-free paper) — ISBN 978-90-474-2822-0 (e-book)
1. Chinese—Singapore—History—20th century. 2. Immigrants—Singapore—History—20th century. 3. Singapore—Ethnic relations—History—20th century. 4. Sino-Japanese War, 1937–1945—Singapore. 5. World War, 1939–1945—Singapore. 6. World War, 1939–1945—Great Britain. 7. Imperialism—History—20th century. 8. Singapore—History, Military—20th century. I. Title.

DS610.25.C5K64 2013
305.895'10595709044—dc23

2013002995

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ISSN 1876-3847
ISBN 978-90-04-17476-4 (hardback)
ISBN 978-90-47-42822-0 (e-book)

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Printed by Printforce, the Netherlands

Diaspora at War

Chinese Overseas

History, Literature, and Society

VOLUME 6

The titles published in this series are listed at brill.com/cho

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book has been a long time in the writing and I have accrued a debt of gratitude to numerous individuals and institutions in the course of its making. The History department at Monash University has been a wonderful home to me over the past five years. It is difficult to imagine a more collegial collection of scholars, united in their passion for teaching and writing about the past. This book is a better piece of scholarship than it ever could have been for my association with them. I am indebted to Barbara Caine and Mark Peel, who provided much support and advice during this book's formative stage. My sincere thanks as well to Bain Attwood, David Garrioch, the late Bill Kent, and Alistair Thomson for their encouragement and insightful observations about my research. Other colleagues in my research group read parts of the manuscript in draft form and offered their suggestions on refining the core ideas behind my work. I am grateful to Megan Blair, Adam Clulow, Ian Copland, Jane Drakard, Kat Ellinghaus, Ruth Morgan, Kate Murphy, Seamus O'Hanlon, Susie Protschky, Noah Shenker, David Slucki, and Rachel Stevens for their comments that ultimately improved the quality of this study.

Colleagues and friends outside of Monash also shaped this book in important ways. I would like to thank Kevin Blackburn, Chua Mui Hoong, Jason Lim, and Loh Kah Seng for being so generous with sources and information, as well as Li Er and Darren Hanson for providing me with access to the Tan family's archival collection, and for their warm hospitality during my time in the United States. It has been a pleasure collaborating on this study with Brill. My thanks go to the editors of the *Chinese Overseas* series, Wang Gungwu, David Der-wei Wang, Evelyn Hu-DeHart, and Wong Siu-lun, for the opportunity to publish, and to Matt Kawecki, Qin Higley, and Thomas Begley of Brill for their assistance throughout the process.

This research project would not have been feasible without the assistance of librarians and archivists in England, the United States, the People's Republic of China, and Singapore, and I am indebted to their efficiency and help. I thank the staff at the Imperial War Museum, the Public Records Office, the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library, the Society of Oral History on Modern China, the Yunnan Provincial Archives, the Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan, the Teochew Poit Ip Huay Kuan, the Singapore Kwantung Huay Kuan, and the Ngee Ann Kongsi for their help.

A special word is needed here to the following interviewees who provided so much of their lives to the making of this book: Chai Tong Tee, Chia Soon Guan, Ho Weng Toh, Koh Pei Shen, Lee Kim Hock, Leong Ming Sen, Ng Gan Cheng, and Tan Kim Soon. I can only hope that I have done some justice to the richness of their experiences and stories.

My most sincere appreciation goes to my mentor and friend Stephen Dobbs who, in spite of his hectic schedule, went above and beyond in his assistance with proof-reading the draft of the manuscript. I thank my parents, Alfred Koh and Angelia Ho. They never had the privilege of attending university, but imparted to me the most important lessons in my academic life: read closely, listen carefully, and think with an open mind. Finally, to my wife Carol, for her patience, love, and unwavering support, I dedicate this book.

NOTES ON ROMANISATION AND TRANSLATION

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

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

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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[2] Taylor, *Origins of the Second World War*, 1.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[5] R. Samuel, "The Return of History", *London Review of Books*, 14 June 1990, 12.

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

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

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[6] B. Attwood, *Telling the truth about Aboriginal History* (Allen & Unwin: Sydney, 2005), 11–12.

[7] Attwood, *Aboriginal History*, 12.

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