

## Book review: Satoshi Nakano: Japan's Colonial Moment in Southeast Asia 1942-1945 - The Occupiers' Experience

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SATOSHI NAKANO, *Japan's Colonial Moment in Southeast Asia 1942–1945: The Occupiers' Experience*. London: Routledge, 2020. Xi, 274 pages, £36.99. ISBN 978-0-3674-8446-0

This quite unusual history of the Second World War in Asia describes the war almost entirely from a Japanese perspective. At its heart are four less-known documents written by four officials in the service of the Japanese army and the colonial administration, who had been sent to different regions of Southeast Asia during the war and produced accounts detailing their findings and experiences. On the basis of their writings, Nakano composes a broadly chronological story of Japanese warfare and administration in the areas under their command. Nakano's argument is somewhat hidden in this narrative: that the attack on and subsequent occupation of Southeast Asia was the key "moment" (as the title states) in the eventual fall of the Japanese Empire.

In the first chapter, Nakano shows that the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) became concerned with Southeast Asia only very late, less than two years before the attack on Pearl Harbor. Once the war had broken out, two schools of thought developed in the course of the army's strategic planning, which are labelled as "seize the moment" and "circumspect". Advocates of the former called for extensive expansion and subjugation of the areas conquered by the IJA, whereas representatives of the latter camp argued for a more comprehensive assessment of Japan's political and more importantly economic interests in the region. They preferred a policy of long-term cooperation to annexation and exploitation.

Chapter 2 addresses the formation of the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperty Sphere (GEACPS) and discusses if the "circumspect" camp had any influence upon the decision-making of the Japanese government. The GEACPS was based on the assumption of what Nakano calls a "racial war", a conflict between "the East", held together by the notion of pan-Asianism, and the Western imperial powers. However, as chapters 3 and 4 describe, the scheme was not a panacea for all problems created by the war, and especially the degree of independence enjoyed by the members of the GEACPS remained particularly vexing. The question had initially been left open by way of semantic juggling, promising to give each nation its proper place (*sono tokoro*), but as the economic situation of the GEACPS deteriorated (described in detail in chapter 3), calls for greater independence grew louder among its members. The Japanese eventually found themselves in "a labyrinth with no way out" (p. 177), which forced them to postpone the official inauguration of the GEACPS until November 1943. By then, Burma and the Philippines had been granted independence, though in turn this move angered the Indonesians, who had expected to be given the same status. The collapse of the GEACPS, which is detailed in a rather brief final chapter, seemed a logical consequence of the scheme's inherent contradictions.

Within this narrative of logical consequences and causalities, the author's argument sounds conclusive: that the Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia was a crucial factor in the decline of its empire. This argument works of course only on the assumption that Japan having an empire – in Korea, Manchuria and, from 1937, on the Chinese mainland around Nanjing – was justified and unobjectionable. Not only will a Chinese or Korean scholar probably take issue with this premise of the book; it is also interesting to note that Nakano seems to accept some assumptions and claims of the nationalist wing among Japanese historians without discussing (let alone critically examining) their arguments any further. Nakano's reluctance to engage with the wider historiographic debate is certainly a weak spot in his work. However, before the author is accused of colluding with right-wing revisionists it should be remembered here that his aim is to describe the Japanese experience and give an account of the war period from a Japanese vantage point rather than to strive for comprehensiveness or impartiality. Not least, this approach is also reflected in the bibliography, where writings in Japanese clearly dominate those in other languages (mainly English) by far.

But this is not the only problematic aspect of the book, with language also causing confusion on occasion. The book is an English translation from the original Japanese version published in 2012. The translation is generally good, but there are still quite a few examples of poorly constructed sentences or oddly chosen words that puzzle the reader with their obscure meaning. Take the “colonial moment” from the book's title, which doesn't seem to be the best choice to describe a three-year period of war and occupation. Other examples include the “circumspect” approach to dealing with Southeast Asia (p. 28), which appears to mean “comprehensive” or “broader view”; the term “self-existence” (p. 38) instead of “self-sufficiency”; or the use of “scheme” (*boryaku*), where “option” seems a better choice (p. 170). And finally, it remains unclear what the “mechanism of Burma's independence” (p. 172) is supposed to be.

That said, the book is a welcome addition to the literature on the Second World War in Asia, as it provides an informed survey of the internal workings and decision-making of the Japanese government and army command. Even better, these insights come by way of numerous translated extracts from the Japanese sources that form the basis of the book, which are unavailable to scholars not familiar with the Japanese language. Still, a thorough polishing of the language would have enhanced this feature. In contrast to this provision of a multi-faceted picture derived from varied sources, the author seems less interested in their interpretation or in developing an argument – and when the latter does come through, it fails to convince. At the least, some more references to the “bigger issues” that inform historical debates in various ways would have been desirable.