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Asia's 'Great' War: memories and memoryscapes of the 1937-1945 conflict



An International Workshop at the University of Essex
22 March 2014

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Asia's 'Great' War began in earnest with Japan's invasion of China in 1937. It was the most intense, complex and widespread conflict the region had so far experienced. In terms of human cost, it was also very much an Asian war within a global conflict. Of the estimated 24 million killed it is thought Allied personnel made up one per cent.

Recent years have witnessed a 'memory boom' in the number of heritage sites, memorials, memoirs and museums dedicated to this conflict. This international and interdisciplinary workshop explores the causes and motivations behind such a flourishing war heritage industry; the multiple and distinctive ways in which the 1937-1945 conflict is, and has been, remembered; and the new and old historical narratives that are being fashioned. It brings together scholars of South, Southeast and East Asia in discussion with scholars of Europe, to provide new insights into this war and its memorialization from a comparative and interconnected, regional and global, perspective.

What has been the impact of the memories and memoryscapes of Asia's 1937-1945 conflict across a region still so haunted by its violent past? Is the region lurching further into an era of dangerous ethno-nationalism as war memories are mobilized to reinforce aggressive state ideologies? Or, as the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II approaches, is the war heritage boom in fact opening up new routes to historical understanding and even post-conflict reconciliation?

9.30-10.00: Registration and coffee

10.00-10.20: Welcome and introductory remarks

Mark R. Frost, University of Essex, and Daniel Schumacher,
University of Konstanz/University Hong Kong

10.20-11.20: Conflicted memories: heroism and victimhood

Chair/discussant: Michael Roper (Essex)

Aaron Moore, University of Manchester, *Demon Hands: Civilian narratives of urban firebombing in Britain and Japan, 1940-1945*

Heather Goodall, University of Technology, Sydney, *Remembering heroes: Indonesian and Indian memories of the Battle for Surabaya, October to December 1945*

11.20-11.40: Break

11.40-12.40: War memoryscapes and the public: complexities and possibilities

Chair/discussant: Daniel Schumacher

Andrea Witcomb, Deakin University, *ANZACS at Kanchanaburi: the making of a transnational war memoryscape*

Hamzah Muzaini, Wageningen University, *'Postcolonialising' memoryscapes of the Second World War in Perak, Malaysia*

12.40-1.40: Lunch

1.40-2.40: National education: the making of official war memory

Chair/discussant: Priscilla Roberts (Hong Kong)

Edward Vickers, Kyushu University, *Capitalists can do no wrong: officially-sanctioned narratives of the war and occupation in Hong Kong*

Lim Cheng Tju, Institute of Education, *Cartoons and the national remembrance of the Japanese Occupation of Singapore*

2.40-3.00: Break

3.00-4.00: Citizen war heritage: empowerment and enfranchisement?

Chair/discussant: Rainer Schulze (Essex)

Daniel Schumacher, University of Konstanz/Hong Kong, *Memoryscapes as infrastructures: regulation and enfranchisement in Hong Kong and Singapore*

Fumie Ohashi, Waseda University, *Transnational practices of memory-making: circulating panel exhibits on Japan's military sexual violence in China*

5.00-6.30: Keynote address

Diana Lary, University of British Columbia, *Memory Times, Memory Places: public and private memories of the Resistance War in China*

7.30: Conference dinner for speakers and discussants at Wivenhoe House

ABSTRACTS

Aaron Moore, *Demon Hands: Civilian narratives of urban firebombing in Britain and Japan, 1940-1945*

During the World War II bombing of British and Japanese cities, civilians made frequent reference to the experience of witnessing, evading, or fighting fires in their hometowns. By examining the personal documents of urban residents who recorded these events, this paper will discuss how individuals decided to describe their encounter with fire. In some cases, urban residents narrated the conflagrations dispassionately, as if they were a common occurrence that only required proper municipal management. In many other cases, however, Japanese and British citizens embellished their stories, transforming the flames into an anthropomorphized or sinister presence. This paper will present some examples of this sort of life-writing at war, as well as suggest what connection these descriptions of fire shared with residents' emotional relationships with the cities in which they lived – relationships with cities that, in wartime, can only be described as an 'unrequited love.'

Heather Goodall, *Remembering heroes: Indonesian and Indian memories of the Battle for Surabaya, October to December 1945*

The war in Southeast Asia had a long, drawn-out and complex end which stretched from the Japanese surrender on August 15 until well into 1946. In many places, particularly in French Indochina and the Netherlands East Indies, peace meant the outbreak of further conflict. Occupying Japanese were still in place, nominally in charge of civil order. The British Labour government – leading the Allied South East Asia Command (SEAC) – could not make up its mind about whether it supported a return to colonialism or an implementation of the national independence called for in the Atlantic Charter of 1941. On the ground, local nationalists fought against – not the British who commanded SEAC – but Indian troops of the British Army.

Of the many serious battles which left heavy casualties and severe psychological scars, the worst was at Surabaya, where hundreds of Indian troops and thousands of Indonesians died in a terrible month of conflict through November 1945. This event is marked across Indonesia each year through *Heroes Day*, which commemorates the decision taken by Indonesian republicans at Surabaya on November 10 to reject the British demand for surrender and instead fight to the death for the new Republic. Indonesian accounts of the battle and of this day are numerous, and they reflect the characterizations and claims about its Indonesian heroes. Yet there was also a recorder of the Indian experience, the journalist PRS Mani, and he too saw heroes, and yet not the same heroes as those seen by the Indonesians.

This paper compares Indonesian and Indian accounts of heroism at the Battle for Surabaya. PRS Mani, a strong nationalist himself, like many of the Indian troops who fought, wrote an account published years later which drew closely on his 1945 journal and dispatches from Surabaya during the battle. His book, *The Story of Indonesian Revolution, 1945-50*, (1986) documents the awful dilemmas with which Indian troops grappled as they were drawn into a war they loathed, opening fire in an ever-more bitter struggle against Indonesian republicans with whom they shared strong bonds even as they became embittered by pain, fear and death. Who exactly were the heroes at Surabaya – and which heroes were remembered and which forgotten – were questions that remained unanswered long after the bloodshed stopped.

Andrea Witcomb, *ANZACS at Kanchanaburi: the making of a transnational war memoryscape*

Australians have a long and emotional attachment to their war heritage which is widely regarded as central to their national identity. ANZAC Day, on the 25th of April is as significant in our national calendar as Australia Day. Other than the war memorials at the centre of each country town, state capital and the National War

Memorial in Canberra, however, the most significant war heritage sites lie in foreign territories. One of these is the Thai-Burma railway which runs through the town of Kanchanaburi in Thailand.

This paper explores the impact of Australian interest on the way this town memorialises the building of the railway by an international labour force of POWS and indentured Asian labourers. While recognising that there are a number of nationalities for whom the Thai-Burma railway is important, it is the Australian interest which has arguably played a key role in the development of a number of key heritage sites – from the Memorial Museum at Hellfire Pass, paid for by the Australian government but built on Thai Army Land, to a private Australian Museum next to the Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery, to a small museum within the grounds of a Buddhist Temple, and even a private memorial park in memory of Weary Dunlop, an Australian doctor who saved many of the POWs and who became a central figure in the ANZAC legend.

The paper is concerned with examining how this strong Australian interest has helped to shape what has become a transnational memory landscape within a tourist economy, a site of cultural diplomacy and, for many, a site of reconciliation and peace building. It does so by analysing a range of memorial practices at different sites, paying attention to the ways in which these sites reflect and build upon cross-cultural encounters.

Hamzah Muzaini, *'Postcolonialising' memoryscapes of the Second World War in Perak, Malaysia*

This paper examines how the state of Perak in Malaysia has commemorated its involvement in the Second World War (1942-45) since the nation's independence in 1957. Drawing on the textual analysis of select memoryscapes that have emerged in Perak to formally mark the event, and further supplemented with interviews with state officials and ordinary Perakians, it first examines how the state has sought to 'postcolonialise' representations of what took place when Malaysia was still part of British Malaya in order to

allow the event to better resonate with its population. (To 'postcolonialise' here refers to the critique and subsequent re-appropriation of imperial memories often in the bid to salvage and recuperate more 'localised' pasts and experiences that may have been marginalised during colonial times). It then highlights how these official representations of the war have been popularly critiqued as partial to certain perspectives of the war that have served to rather alienate local Perakians who feel that these state-forged memoryscapes are too biased, exclusive and therefore not for them. More broadly, the paper shows the ways in which the task of 'postcolonialising' history is necessarily incomplete, especially where, among other factors, there is also still the neo-colonial impulse to privilege certain groups in memory making albeit at the clear expense of others.

Edward Vickers, *Capitalists can do no wrong: Officially-sanctioned narratives of the war and occupation in Hong Kong*

This paper deals with how the public representation of Hong Kong's conquest and occupation by Japan has evolved over the period since 1997. While focusing mainly on the war's portrayal in two major local museums, the Hong Kong Museum of History and the Hong Kong Museum of Coastal Defence, it also discusses representations of the war (or the lack of them) in the broader context of the colony's postwar history, and of cultural and education policy in the years before and since the retrocession. This context has included a nation-building agenda to some extent shaped by mainland-style 'patriotic' messages, whose influence is certainly evident in school textbook portrayals of China's 'War of Resistance'. Meanwhile, the introduction since the mid-1990s of local history content into the school curriculum has also brought a Hong Kong dimension to textbook portrayals of this conflict. In discussing to what extent and why official portrayals of the war – in museums and school textbooks – differ from those seen in other Chinese societies, the paper especially highlights issues pertaining to the portrayal of the

local Chinese elite. It concludes that the fundamental continuity of this elite, and its close relationship with the political authorities – British, Japanese or Chinese – accounts for peculiarities in the handling of the issue of collaboration. It is argued that the selective treatment of this issue reflects tensions inherent in the attempt to promote a vision of Hong Kong as both an apolitical capitalist utopia, and a staunchly ‘patriotic’ Chinese community.

Lim Cheng Tju, *Cartoons and the national remembrance of the Japanese Occupation of Singapore*

The recent controversy at the Angouleme Comic Festival over the Korean comic exhibition on comfort women, which resulted in a formal protest by the Japanese government, shows that the events of the Second World War in Asia have hardly been forgotten. The use of cartoons to evoke memories of the war is nothing new. As early as 1946, pioneer Singapore artist Liu Kang drew a set of cartoons about the Japanese Occupation of Singapore from 1942 to 1945. While Liu Kang’s message is very clear: never to forget, I will argue that other aspects behind the production of the cartoons are forgotten as a direct consequence of their use by the Singapore state as part of its national education programme. The way the state selects and utilises these cartoons to publicly memorialize the Japanese Occupation reflects its clear educational and nation-building agenda, one that fulfils its intentions at the expense of complex visual meanings cartoons that are often more political or confrontational in nature.

Daniel Schumacher, *Memoryscapes as infrastructures: regulation and enfranchisement in Hong Kong and Singapore*

In recent years, scholars have begun to pay more attention to both the transnational dimensions of public war remembrance in Asia and the important role non-state actors have played therein. ‘Memoryscapes’ has become a popular term in this context and is often employed as

an analytical category without, however, offering any substantial theoretical underpinning. In this paper, I will attempt to further the debate on how the term might be understood in regard to changing social, political, and economic relations in Asia.

I propose to conceptualise memoryscapes as infrastructures, i.e., as an inventory of both the tangible and intangible components agents can systematically employ in an effort to symbolically order and structure space and the societies occupying it. By examining the actions of select non-governmental agents in Hong Kong and Singapore, I intend to show how the appropriation and reinvention of this inventory for regulation can result in the political enfranchisement of these agents.

I will first look at Hong Kong’s organised Pacific War veterans and their campaign for compensation and consular privileges in the 1980s and 1990s. I will attempt to illustrate how the territory’s colonial-era infrastructure of sites and practices allowed the campaigners to tap into and give expression to a globalised set of moral norms, as well as to harness the political dynamics of decolonisation to their advantage. I will then conclude with an example from Singapore and a consultancy firm’s endeavour in the 2000s to performatively weave together war-related sites and package them for tourist consumption. I will argue that instead of merely trivialising war and human suffering, the resulting infrastructure also offered significant chances for non-state bodies to undermine the state’s supposedly overpowering control over the public representation of the past.

I thus hope to show that understanding memoryscapes as infrastructures can help us identify and delineate continuities and shifts in power relations that are both contingent upon local political forces and, importantly, dependent upon regional and transnational forces in the social and economic fields.

Fumie Ohashi, *Transnational practices of memory-making: circulating panel exhibits on Japan's military sexual violence in China*

Since 2009, Japanese and Chinese citizen groups have successfully held panel exhibits in China on Japan's military sexual violence in Asia. By the end of the year 2012, they had circulated these exhibits in local museums, universities and private galleries in Wuxiang County (Shanxi), Beijing City, Xi'an City, Guangzhou City and Nanjing City.

By focusing on their exhibits, this paper sheds light on the transnational networking of people across China and Japan to restore the dignity of the women who survived the Japanese military's sexual violence and enslavement during both the Sino-Japanese War and World War II. Their efforts are unique in several aspects. Firstly, the exhibits consist of mostly textual information with some collateral pictures. Many panels are displayed to introduce life histories, testimonies and other records of the individual survivors, their families, local witnesses and Japanese ex-soldiers. Secondly, while the exhibits focus largely on the cases of victims in China, they contrive to have visitors also learn more about the victims of Japanese military sexual violence in Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaya, and the Netherlands East Indies. Thirdly, they also incorporate a large amount of space to explaining the post-war lawsuits, historical investigations and peace movements that have arisen as consequence of this conflict, and been supported by people all over the world.

Despite the challenges posed by the recent upsurge of nationalism both in Japan and China, the exhibits have received a lot of positive feedback from visitors. This paper envisions that cross-border exhibitions such as these, and the transnational sharing of such memories, can inspire public responses that undercut prevailing jingoistic attitudes.

Diana Lary, *Memory Times, Memory Places: public and private memories of the Resistance War in China*

Memories of the Resistance War in China (1937-1945) are highly complex. The practices of when and where to remember the most costly war in China's modern history reflect China's internal politics and her international relations. Private memory is equally influenced by politics, and by the civil war that followed the Resistance War. Official memory times are often associated with suffering and outrage, not with victory or remembrance of the war dead. The calendar of dates is full. Private memory times have to do with the New Year and with the Qingming Festival. Ceremonies should take place at graves, but many of the dead have no graves. Moreover, after a long period when the Resistance War had few memorial sites, there are now an enormous number of museums and revolutionary sites. Private memorials to lost family members face the problem of the absence of graves, while the public practice of memorialization gains pace. This lecture examines the memories and memoryscapes of 1937-45 conflict in both their intimate and grand complexity.

PARTICIPANTS

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Diana Lary is Professor Emerita in the Department of History at the University of British Columbia and one of the foremost historians of modern China. Her most recent publications include *The Chinese People at War: Human suffering and social transformation* (Cambridge 2010) and *China's Republic* (Cambridge 2007). lary@mail.ubc.ca

Lim Cheng Tju is an educator who writes about history and popular culture. His articles have appeared in *the Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* and the *Journal of Popular Culture and Print Quarterly*. He is co-author of *The University Socialist Club and the Contest for Malaya: Tangled Strands of Modernity* (Amsterdam/National University of Singapore, 2012). 6menshow@gmail.com

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Priscilla Roberts is Associate Professor at the University of Hong Kong. She is a co-investigator of the 'Writing the War in Asia Network' (WWAN). Her research focuses on international relations in the twentieth century and her most recent publication is *Voices of World War II: Contemporary Accounts of Daily Life* (Greenwood 2012). proberts@hku.hk

Michael Roper is Professor of Sociology at the University of Essex. His research interests include war, memory and the transmission of trauma across generations, and he is currently working on a British Academy funded project, "'The Generation Between": growing up in the aftermath of war, Britain 1918-1939'. mrop@essex.ac.uk

Rainer Schulze is a Professor in the Department of History at the University of Essex, and a world-renowned expert on the Holocaust and its memorialization. He is the co-ordinator of the annual Holocaust Memorial events at the University of Essex, and founding editor of the journal *The Holocaust in History and Memory*.
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Daniel Schumacher is co-investigator and editor of the international 'Writing the War in Asia Network' (WWAN). He has recently completed a PhD at the University of Konstanz which focuses on war remembrance in Singapore and Hong Kong and is currently a visiting research fellow at the University of Hong Kong.
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Edward Vickers is Associate Professor at Kyushu University. His research focuses on the contemporary history of education in Chinese societies (mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong), with a particular focus on the role of schools and other public institutions (e.g. museums) in political socialization. He is currently working with a Chinese scholar on a book-length history of China's education system since the 1970s.
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Andrea Witcomb is Associate Professor (Research) at Deakin University. She is the Director of the Cultural Heritage Centre for Asia and the Pacific and Deputy Director of Alfred Deakin Research Institute. She is also principle investigator for the Australia Research Council funded 'Australian Heritage Abroad: Managing Australia's Extraterritorial War Heritage' project. Her latest book, co-written with Kate Gregory, is *From the Barracks to the Burrup: The National Trust in Western Australia* (NSW Press 2010).
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