

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Japanese-Trained Armies in Southeast Asia: Independence and Volunteer Forces in World War II* by Joyce C. Lebra, Hong Kong, Heinemann Educational Books (Asia), 1977, iv + 226 pp.

Scholarship in the English language on Southeast Asia in the fifties and the sixties, with some exceptions,<sup>1</sup> has not focused much on the Japanese occupation and its legacy. This was due in the main to the fact that that occupation was harsh and unpleasant, and almost everyone was glad to have that period left behind. In part also the period was all too brief and what possible legacy there was could not have been seen as too lasting when compared, say, with the centuries of relationship between Southeast Asia and the West and China. While the situation has not exactly turned full circle, there is nevertheless increasing scholarly interest today on that period. This has come about because of the rising interest in things Japanese, brought about no doubt by present Japanese economic might and their potential political role in this region. There is however another reason and that is the present constellation of political forces. The governments today in three important Southeast Asian countries, Burma, Indonesia, and Thailand are dominated by the army, and, within these three and other Southeast Asian countries, many rural-based parties play influential roles. The armies of Burma and Indonesia had their origins in the Japanese period and many of the rural-based groups were originally encouraged by the Japanese to be politically active. Without doubt some of the character and behavior particularly of the army as a group and of its leading personalities must have been influenced by the manner in which they were conceived like the characteristic of the lack of complete separation between the military and political roles of the army such as is a tenet in Anglo-Saxon democracies, and the emphasis in training on spiritual rather than material strength.

Recognizing this second reason (she was first led to write this book by her study of the Indian National Army which drew many of her recruits from overseas Indians in Southeast Asia) and also the possible contribution a study of Japanese-trained armies can make to our understanding of the military in general, Joyce Lebra has set about to collect empirical data on this neglected and fascinating area. In doing so many interesting aspects of the Japanese military involvement are brought out.

One of the most important themes in her book is the two different types of armies in Southeast Asia that were trained by the Japanese. The first type consisted of those armies that had some promise of eventual liberation by the Japanese. They consisted of the Indian National Army, the Burma Independence Army, and Peta, the army derived from Javanese recruits. The second type were essentially voluntary armies or *giyūgun* where Japanese motives in training them were of a purely military character. There was little or no political basis. Such volunteer armies were found

<sup>1</sup> See for example, Harry J. Benda, *The Crescent and the Rising Sun* (The Hague: W. van Hoeve, 1958); Benedict R.O.G. Anderson, *Some Aspects of Indonesian Politics under the Japanese Occupation: 1944-1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1961).

in Malaya, Sumatra, Indochina, Borneo, and the Philippines. The difference in Japanese attitude towards these two types, Lebra makes clear, derived from the strength of the nationalist movement and from these circumstances that permitted or did not permit the Southeast Asians to collaborate with the Japanese—it is quite likely that if the Japanese had things entirely their way all the armies would be purely military in character. In India then, there was already considerable agitation against the British with one stream led by Nehru and Gandhi and the other, more violent in character, by Subhas Chandra Bose. So was the situation in both Java and Burma when the Japanese began to train their armies. There were already in existence nationalist leaders like Sukarno and Aung San with significant statures among their own people. These leaders were primarily interested in seeking independence from their Western colonial powers, and if they (in the case of India the stream under Bose) were not entirely adverse to collaborating with the Japanese it was not to be at the expense of their independence aims. The Japanese had no choice but to make some political commitment in these countries, though not always in a clear-cut fashion and subject to the change in events and personalities.

As to the second type, in the case of Malaysia, the nationalist movement was not strong because of the communal nature of the society. It was not then possible for the Malays to combine with the Indians and the Chinese against the British. In Sumatra where nationalism was not as strong as in Java and where it was part of the same administrative unit as Malaya, the Japanese had an added reason not to stir up nationalist feelings. Sumatra had essential petroleum resources and Japan's conception of her occupation there was more permanent in character. In the Philippines, the nationalist movement was pro-American in character and, moreover, the United States had already promised independence. Hence, the Japanese could not make much headway in developing an anti-American Filipino army. The Japanese position in Indochina was complicated by the fact that the French administrative structure there was Vichy-dominated. This allowed for Japan to maintain some 35,000 troops there. While subsequently the Japanese took over direct administrative control, they never quite got around to organizing a politically motivated army of the first type.

Another striking aspect of her findings was the lack of a coherent policy on the part of Japan towards Southeast Asia before the war. This is in contrast to the general belief on the part of many that Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia was the culmination of a general movement southwards, *nanshin*, all part of a master plan, involving dubious research bureaus, secret societies, and private Japanese citizens, that began many years before the war. It was no doubt true, when Japan finally decided to adopt a clear policy towards Southeast Asia, she made use of all the groups mentioned above, and that she coveted the resources of Southeast Asia. But, according to Lebra, the Japanese army, just before her conquest of Southeast Asia, was too preoccupied with the Russian threat and that led her to focus attention on Manchuria, North China, and Korea at the expense of other parts of Asia. Moreover her spectacular and unexpectedly quick military successes in Southeast Asia did not give Japan much time to formulate coherent policies. There were very few cases of agents sent to Southeast Asia before the war with the aim of assessing the situation and to create disaffection among Southeast Asians against the Western powers.

But in such cases the characters involved and their relationship with Tokyo are fascinating. Two of them, Iwaichi Fujiwara of the Fujiwara Kikan (Fujiwara Agency) and Colonel Keiji Suzuki of the Minami Kikan (Southern Agency) (and later Mune-nari Yanagawa who was to train the Javanese Peta) saw themselves in the mould of Lawrence of Arabia. Fujiwara was supposed to work with overseas Indians in Thailand and Malaya while Suzuki was to work with the Burmese. They had this romantic and visionary attitude that they were destined to lead the natives in their independence struggle against their colonial masters. They were to develop lasting friendships with some of the overseas Indians and Burmese they worked with and were to champion their course in Tokyo even at times when it was against the best interests of Tokyo, particularly in the case with Suzuki.

Joyce Lebra in this book has of course made a contribution to our understanding of this now apparently profound period in modern Southeast Asian history. She has utilized a fair amount of Japanese sources, both documentary and oral, together with English language sources to bring about a fairly readable book. Her discussion of the significance of the Japanese military model for Southeast Asia is generally valid in my opinion. However, if criticisms were to be given of this book, I would say that it is too Japanese-oriented. By that is meant there is a lot on Tokyo's view of things and Japanese personalities, and not nearly enough on the Southeast Asian side. This kind of perspective gives the impression that the response from the Southeast Asians to Japanese initiatives was clear-cut, either collaboration or rejection when the whole attitude towards the Japanese and also the Western colonial powers were much more ambivalent. There is by no means an adequate discussion of Southeast Asian nationalism especially when such was crucial to Japanese policy. The section on Malaya is rather weak, a result no doubt of the difficulty of getting documents and the relevant interviews. I wonder if her spelling out of the acronym MPAJA in page 114 as the Malay People's Anti-Japanese Army instead of the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army is a typographical error. Similarly, in the same page, she writes of a Malay Communist Party instead of a Malayan Communist Party. If these are not typographical errors, then the existence of these groups, hitherto unsuspected, should be worth further study. Such apart, I recommend this book to those who would seek to know more of the Japanese occupation and its legacy. (Lee Poh Ping)

*Peasants and Their Agricultural Economy in Colonial Malaya, 1874-1941* by Lim Teck Ghee, Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press, 1977, xiv + 291 pp.

## I

Economic history studies of colonial Malaya have generally focused on plantation agriculture and the mining industry, the two leading interests controlled by large-scale colonial enterprise. There are of course some accounts on the peasant economy by colonial administrators and scholars, whose scope, however, was limited mainly