

WAR AND REMEMBRANCE THROUGH PENANG MUSEUMS AND MEMORIALS

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Introduction

This paper is a preliminary observation on the depiction of the Japanese occupation in Penang museums and memorial such as the State Museum, the Second World War Museum and other public dedication to this period. Based on site visits the discussion is rather descriptive with the focus on the various types of visual representations to evoke memories of the war. The depictions of the wartime period differs from one museum to another and between museums and the standard account. In reality there are two levels of memory that are on public display which are at variance with one another - the official memory as opposed to the public or private (although much publicised) memory.

Memory of war and the Penang State Museum

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Attempts of the Penang State Museum to museumise the war and its memory has already been discussed elsewhere.¹ Briefly, the foregrounding of war memory and the occupation period is treated as part of the island's ethnic mingling which began in the mid-18th century when Malays from Sumatra migrated to Penang. Under British rule starting with Francis Light and the East India Company in 1786, the island's multi-ethnic identity began to take shape and the Japanese presence before 1942 is treated as part of this ethnic mingling. Unfortunately the word "prostitute" (or prostitution) which was very much a part of Japanese activities in the prewar period is avoided, so as "not to offend the sensibilities of the Japanese" which in the pre-September 11 period made up a sizeable component of the tourists coming to Penang. If this is the case then changes in the visual

¹ Abu Talib Ahmad, "Museums and the Japanese occupation of Malaya" in *Reflections on Southeast Asian History since 1945* edited by Richard Mason & Abu Talib Ahmad (Universiti Sains Malaysia Publisher, forthcoming)

representations after September 11 is in order as Chinese, Taiwanese and especially those from the Middle East currently formed the majority of tourist arrivals in Penang. A recent study on this museum have subjected its exhibits to much criticisms for its tendency to simplify historical reality such as the involvement of Malay-Muslims in secret societies during the mid-19 century which was done behind the façade of cultural or religious organizations.²

Compared to other local museums the Penang State Museum foregrounds very little exhibits on the Japanese period although the displays do indicate the museum's attempts to keep alive the memory of the occupation, the trauma that Penangites went through and to recall possible lessons to be gained. The display of remembrance is very selective and rather diplomatic to the Japanese, foregrounding those that are deemed suitable by the museum bureaucrats in the context of the island's multi-cultural society which formed the central theme of the island's historical narrative since the mid-18th century. After all this museum is preoccupied with provincial concerns rather than national ones.

Equally interesting are the displays located outside the museum although none have any direct relation with the Japanese occupation or the Second World War. There is an item that was related to the First World War in the form of an anchor of the French destroyer *Les Mousquet* which was sunk by the German light cruiser *Emden* on 29 October 1914 approximately 11 nautical miles of the Penang Muka Head coast. This is perhaps the only surviving evidence of the escapade of the infamous *Emden* which terrorized British merchantmen in the Bay of Bengal and the Melaka Straits in late 1914. It was also one of the few evidence to indicate that the First World War, essentially a European affair, had reached Malaya. Earlier in the day this German warship had brazenly shelled Penang harbour inflicting considerable damage including the sinking of

² Norhasimah Hasan, "Muzium, Sejarah dan Propaganda: Kajian ke atas Muzium Negeri Pulau Pinang dan Muzium Warisan Islam Pulau Pinang" [Museum, history and propaganda: A study on the Penang State Museum and Museum of Islamic Heritage, Penang] (Long essay for HSM 315/4 Documents in Malaysian History 2: 2004)

the Russian cruiser Zhemshug just off the E & O Hotel with the loss of 89 lives including scores of Japanese prostitutes who were on board at the time.³

The small section on the Japanese period (1941-45) is introduced by comments on the British surrender attributed to R L Cutter from the 'E' Company of the 3rd Battalion of the Straits Settlements Volunteer Force (SSVF) in the following dejected tone: "Penang was occupied by the Japanese invaders on December 15, 1941 without a shot being fired. From then until Christmas, British troops began their full retreat for 'fortress' Singapore. When the British declared Penang an open city everybody felt tremendously let down, confused and betrayed. The surrender was very simple. A Japanese (Colonel Hiroshi) came, told us to stack our arms in a tripod and ordered us to go home." This is followed by a short narrative describing the kind of life Penangites went through for 3 years and 8 months of Japanese rule that left an indelible scars on the survivors. "Wartime condition created shortages in essential commodities and the lack of daily necessities led to privations and sufferings. The strict enforcement of law and order, in particular the swift execution of law breakers, created tension and anxiety among the people. The Japanese tried to create diversions for the local population, which led to the mushrooming of amusement parks, gambling and liquor stalls, cabarets and dance halls." This description is in consonance with the standard historical texts although it must be pointed out that amusement parks were already in vogue during the 1930s, if not earlier. A museum such as this one needs a diversity of visual representations, ones that closely represent the reality of the period but at the same time capable of attracting the attention of the casual visitors.

Compared to other provincial museums the visual displays of the period is meager and less dramatic. There are pictures of Japanese officers in full military regalia, one of which was without any caption or narrative. There is also a photograph of another officer addressing a crowd near the Kapitan Kling mosque in Pitt Street again without an accompanying narrative or caption. There is an interesting calendar titled *Penang*

³ See Margaret Shennan, *Out in the Midday Sun* (London: Routledge, 2000) pp. 82-87. Emden was later sunk in the Cocos Islands after an engagement with an Australian warship in November 1914.

Shimbun Victory Calendar dated 20 February 1945. Interestingly the calendar still referred to the English way of reckoning days, Sunday to Saturday instead of the Japanese reckoning of *Nichiyobi* to *Doyobi*.

One important display is the *Buku Tabung Wang Pejabat Pos Malai* (Savings account book of the Malaya Post Office) accompanied by instructions to account holders. This item is an important aspect of Japanese wartime policy to encourage savings and to reduce inflation in Malaya. A minimum of \$1.00 was required to open an account which earned 3% annual interest. Depositors could withdraw their money by means of fast withdrawal, telegraphic withdrawal or withdrawal through normal means.

Then there is a two and half feet long Japanese sword which in the popular mind symbolized many things including Japanese military valour and the infliction of torture of the worst kind perpetrated on the local population. This particular sword has quite an interesting history. It was surrendered by an unknown Japanese officer on 3rd September 1945 and then kept as a memento by the 3rd Battalion SSVF (Penang and Province Wellesley) to “commemorate the services of the battalion and placed at its headquarters in Peel Avenue. After the dispersal of the battalion the sword was handed over to Captain Mohd. Noor Mohamad, the officer commanding the Malay Company of 3rd Battalion. Mohd. Noor kept the sword until July 1964 when it was presented to the Penang museum, in his words, “as a solemn token of deep appreciation of devotion and loyalty of all his friends – officers and other ranks of the 3rd Battalion SSVF who served during the war.”

Equally interesting is the information regarding holidays, festivals and anniversaries for 2005 (1945) which were enforced in Malaya at that time. There were 21 anniversaries/holidays altogether with 3 in January, 2 for February, 3 for March, 3 for April, one for May, one for July, one for September, 3 for October, 2 for November and 2 for December. The February anniversaries/holidays were particularly important; one was *Kigen Setsu* (Empire Day) on the 11th and the other, *Malai Shinsai Kinenbi* (Anniversary for the Rebuilding of Malaya) on 15th February. April celebrations were equally

important such as *Jimmu Tenno Sai* (Anniversary of the demise of Emperor Jimmu who is revered by the Japanese as a descendent of a *kami* or god, one who founded the Japanese imperial family in 660 BC), which was held on the 3rd, *Tencho Setsu* (Birthday of the Emperor of Japan) on the 29th and *Yasukuni Jinja Taisai* (Yasukuni Shrine festival commemorating those who died in wars for the nation) on the 30th. July 7th is associated with the *Shiina Jihen Kinenbi* (Anniversary of the China incident) while the Manchurian incident of September 18 was also declared an important anniversary. December 8th was associated with the *Daitoa Senso Kinenbi* (Anniversary of the Greater East Asian War) while the *Taisho Tennosai* (Anniversary of the Demise of the Emperor Taisho) was held on the 25th. All the holidays/anniversaries relate more to the Japanese but locals were required to observe them with much reverence. Such celebrations were well attended by local officials of various categories with a heavy presence of Japanese officers partly to ensure local conformity to the rituals. As has been discussed elsewhere Islam and the religious functionaries like the *kathis* were duly roped in as part of these celebrations such as the *Tencho Setsu* and the *Daitoa Senso Kinenbi*.⁴

The Penang War Museum and the memory of war

This is actually an outdoor museum sited at a former World War 2 British military fortress which was constructed in the 1930s by the Royal Engineers and local labour. This fortress was “situated on 20 acres of what is now known as Batu Maung Hill complete with underground military tunnels, intelligence and logistic centre, halls, offices, ventilation shafts, canon firing bays, sleeping quarters, cook houses as well as medical infirmary.” Its location is very strategic covering the sea on one side and the other side, the Bayan Lepas plain and the Penang aerodrome. Some of the exhibits were not originally part of the fort such as the anti-aircraft gun, photographs, graves, a memorial stone and the two pill boxes located just outside the museum compound. The last items were brought over from the nearby Sungai Ara and Sungai Nibong areas. However the access road to this museum is poor, and so is the means to get to the place

⁴ Abu Talib Ahmad, *The Malay-Muslims, Islam and the Rising Sun: 1942-45* (Kuala Lumpur: MBRAS, 2003) chapter 4

although visitors could arrange their transportation with the museum through their hotels. Yet the visit is still worth it, both for its educational value and the physical exercise necessitated by the museum's layout. Others find the RM 10 entrance fee quite stiff which they believed might discourage domestic visitors especially those from the surrounding areas.

This museum is a good example of museumising attempts by a private business entity. In its own way it seeks to re-tell the story of the occupation as it should be told without any bias or excessive censorship as often the case with other museums or in the national narrative. Equally significant is the way it seeks to reconcile historical reality with profitability through the foregrounding of local memory, local events or events that occurred within Southeast Asia thus placing Penang within a regional setting. In contrast to the State Museum's tactful foregrounding of exhibits and narratives there is no such attempt by the this War Museum. Besides the military side, this museum also foregrounds Japanese brutalities and torture that were afflicted on the local population and the kind of life locals had to endure. Not forgotten is the element of heroism of those resisting the Japanese.

There are some glaring drawbacks. Surprisingly there is not much on the military preparedness of the defenders, or whether, the 15 inch guns located here were actually fired against the Japanese invaders before Penang was occupied on 15 December 1945 unlike the ones at Fort Siloso in Singapore. The popular story in this locality is that the Japanese only took 16 hours to capture this fortress; elsewhere we know that the whole of Penang was captured by the Japanese without firing a shot while the British evacuation from the island was criticized as being racial (only English women and children were evacuated to Singapore in rather secret fashion).⁵ The Japanese later turned this fortress into their military headquarters for the area (Bayan Lepas) and a holding centre for prisoners by the kempeitai. Undoubtedly some of these prisoners were killed here while others sent to the notorious Siam-Burma railway project.

⁵ Shu Yun-Ts'iao & Chua Ser-Koon (eds), *Malayan Chinese Resistance to Japan 1937-1945 -- Selected Source Materials*, p. 21

The sprawling complex offers a variety of exhibits. Most of them are sited in the former living quarters of soldiers manning this fortress. Foremost are those relating to defences such as guns called the Penang battery which is devoid of its 15 inch gun, an anti-aircraft gun which was brought from elsewhere, empty ammunition shells, a motorcycle used by the dispatch rider plying between this fort and the British base at Minden barracks (the present site of Universiti Sains Malaysia) and an intelligence gathering office. There were tunnels such as the one leading to secret rooms and for escape purposes. The secret rooms include a meeting room and a communication centre. These look impressive especially to the younger visitors while to others they suggest an inadequacy in the whole defensive structure of the island or for that matter, the whole of Malaya. There is a small guard room in which was placed a siren with hand stand which was donated by the Malaysian Armed forces. It is not known if this was a wartime memorabilia or one that belongs to the postwar period. Below the guard room one encounters various pictures relating to the Death Railway where thousands of prisoners of war (POWs) perished. According to the museum some 15,000 of them died in inhospitable terrains and working conditions. It is possible that a few of the dead labourers disembark from this fortress. There is also a photograph of the British landing in Penang in September 1945

The living quarters of the soldiers manning this fort were separated into race (and religion) such as for British officers, the Indian rank and files, and the Malay soldiers. There was a *surau* (prayer house) for Muslims. Such divisions might be practical but reflective of the inherent lack of unity within the British-Indian forces that came to the fore in the Jitra campaign prior to the Japanese occupation of Penang and until the capitulation of Singapore in February 1942.

I am attracted to the war memorial which is not just for the second world war but also include the first world war, the Siam-Burma Death Railway, the Malayan Emergency, the Indonesian confrontation and the re-insurgency period (1968-90). This memorial was attributed to the Penang Veterans Association and completed in 2003. This

is the usual type of memorial and the insertion of the emergency and the post emergency period is meant perhaps to make it more relevant to the younger generations. Beside this monument there is a small building which looks like a place of contemplation that was constructed for the purpose of remembering the war victims. According to the accompanied caption this building is used as a "special place to remember the ones that had fought and died for our country." Perhaps this was directed to museum visitors who wish to contemplate about the war and the sacrifices of those who had perished.

Equally significant is the generator room that supplied power throughout the fort but now dubbed the "House of Pain" and this is indicated by the accompanied photographs and exhibits relating to Japanese brutality. There is a photograph of a woman who was raped and then bayoneted to death, a picture of a tortured man (A. Raju then 38) who survived this horrible ordeal in February 1945 as well as some torture tools that were used by the Japanese. In another building related events that took place in other parts of Southeast Asia are foregrounded. There is some information complete with photos of the trials and executions of General Honma Masaharu, the conqueror of the Philippines and General Yamashita Tomoyuki, the tiger of Malaya. Both trials took place in Manila in 1946 and both generals were executed in Fort Santiago. These punishments might fit in what many commentators termed as victors' justice which also took place in other parts of reoccupied Southeast Asian and Japan but nevertheless served to remind the Japanese that their conquest of Southeast Asia was a war of shame and not a war of liberation and fame.

Penang Memorials

Briefly there are two types memorial, cemetery/grave related and non-cemetery/non-grave ones. As for the latter four such memorial sites have been identified on Penang island. I believe there are many more similar sites especially in Seberang Perai. In this short paper I am not discussing the former types although a study on them, like Patricia Lim's study of the Johore memorials, is certainly of great interest to wartime Malaysian history. I have already referred to the memorial which is located in the War Museum

compound which was completed in 2003, the year this museum began its operation. This memorial also encompasses other wars notably the first world war and the emergency. There seems to be a waning interest among the public to commemorate the earlier wars notably the first world war which essentially involved only Europeans and it make much sense to connect them to the emergency which is more recent. This observation is supported by the lack of public awareness of the first world war memorial located at the popular tourist site at the Penang Esplanade (Gurney Drive) near Fort Cornwallis. This impressive monument was meant as a world war one memorial but as elsewhere, the second world war was added later.

The other public memorial is located in Air Itam near Penang Hill and sited inside a busy roundabout. There is a bit of commemoration on this site every year for the victims who were mainly those killed during the Japanese bombings of Penang in early December. Perhaps the most famous is the one located in the compound of the Chung Ling School in Air Itam. This memorial was specifically constructed for the teachers and pupils of Chung Ling who were killed by the Japanese during the notorious Sook Ching incidence. As it is located within a school compound there is much commemoration at this site every year.

Possibly there are many more sites of the grave/cemetery types which are located all over Penang island. Immediately after the Japanese surrender efforts were made to reburied victims of Japanese atrocities in proper burial sites. These sites have been a site of mourning especially by family members in regular annual remembrance.

Concluding Remarks

Penang museums have not done much justice in their depiction of the occupation period as narrated in various local studies.⁶ These depictions were done selectively in accordance with certain views of the museum bureaucrats or in the case of the war museum, the museum operator. They do however reflect the way certain sections of the

⁶ One such study is by Universiti Sains Malaysian students entitled *Pulau Pinang di zaman Pendudukan Jepun (1941-45)* [Penang during the Japanese Occupation, (1941-45) vol. 1 & 2 (Penang, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Practicum Papers, 1972-73)

population view the occupation period notably with regards Japanese cruelty towards the local population especially the Chinese. Although one could not deny the efforts of these museums in keeping alive the memory of the war and the occupation museum visitors were quite often left with many unanswered questions.

On the other hand memorials are much more effective in keeping alive the memory of the war especially among family members and friends of those who have perished during the Japanese period. But then again public interests in these memorials are waning especially in the absence of any form of official public commemorations in relation to the Japanese occupation, unlike the annual Warrior Day celebrations which is held at the National Monument in Kuala Lumpur. In the end the most effective means of public commemoration are the ones held at cemeteries/monuments that are undertaken regularly by the Chinese community not just in Penang but in other parts of the country.⁷

⁷ Patricia Lim Pui Huen, "War and ambivalence: Monuments and Memorials in Johor" in *War and Memory in Malaysia and Singapore* edited by Patricia Lim Pui Huen & Diana Wong (Singapore: ISEAS, 2001)