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Entanglement of Business and Politics in the Chinese Diaspora: Interrogating the Wartime Patriotism of Aw Boon Haw

HUANG JIANLI

This article focuses on the wartime experiences of Aw Boon Haw who was the renowned billionaire peddler of the Tiger Balm ointment and owner of an influential chain of regional newspapers. After the Sino-Japanese War broke out in July 1937, he traveled from Singapore to the wartime Chinese capital of Chongqing to meet up with Chiang Kai-shek and his Guomintang leaders. But soon after, he opted to stay in Hong Kong throughout the occupation period and became closely associated with the Japanese-sponsored government of Wang Jingwei, even making a trip to Tokyo to meet the Japanese Prime Minister. When the war ended, amidst accusations of him having been a traitor who collaborated with the occupation authorities, he switched his loyalty back to China and the British colonial settlements and resumed his business operations and philanthropic activities.

This wartime experience of Aw brings into sharp relief the sort of political entanglement which prominent Chinese overseas business people can be entrapped in. Suspicions about his wartime patriotism initially hounded him and he had to issue denials. However, in the midst of confusion over the outbreak of the Chinese Civil War and the American reversal of occupation policy in Japan, there was an absence of formal governmental or public actions, allowing the issue to fade away and Aw's business and charity to return to normalcy. It was more than 30 years later, at the height of the economic reopening of Communist mainland China and the renewed importance of Chinese overseas capital in the 1980s and 1990s, that Aw's wartime patriotism was re-examined, this time calculated to pass a new and presumably last verdict that Aw had been most unfairly judged and that he

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was actually an iconic true overseas Chinese patriot. This posthumous honor was conferred on him despite the fact that the supposedly new empirical evidence was far from conclusive. It was an act of political restoration in semi-academic garb and enacted with an eye to facilitating further business ties between a resurgent China and the Chinese diaspora.

Introduction: The Tiger Story in Brief

THE “TIGER BALM KING” AW BOON HAW 胡文虎 (1882–1954) was the Myanmar-born son of a Chinese peasant who migrated from Yongding 永定 county in Fujian 福建 province to Yangon in the early 1860s. Upon his father’s death in 1908, he took over the small family medicine shop and worked with his younger brother Aw Boon Par 胡文豹 (1884–1944) to promote the sale of a newly-concocted Tiger Balm ointment 万金油 which was touted as, literally, a magical cure-all supposedly derived from a secret recipe enmeshing ingredients such as tiger’s genitals.¹ Aw Boon Haw was a far-sighted businessman. One of his first business acts was to embark on a 1909 market-survey tour in the East Asian countries of China, Japan and Hong Kong where he quickly grasped the importance of packaging, branding, pricing, mass distribution and large-scale advertising from the emerging newspaper industry (Cochran 2001: 171–72; Cochran 2003: 2–3, 5–8). He returned home to package his ointment in attractive hexagonal glass jars and tiny tin cans, which were colorfully labeled with the tiger logo and packaged with pictures of him and his brother. He also pitched them at an affordable price. Posters went up on the walls of many buildings and in the streets, drawing public attention to his products. In 1913, he launched his first newspapers, *Jit Poh* 日 报 and *Chen Poh* 晨 报 in Yangon, as a pillar of his advertising enterprise.

By 1926, Aw had made enough money to propel his business to the “take-off” stage of development. He moved his family and that of his brother out of the relatively less developed Myanmar, relocating them and the headquarters of his family business Eng Aun Tong Medical Hall 永安堂 to Singapore, while setting up a secondary base in Hong Kong from where he went about penetrating the China market. Employing a mainly personal network of family members and fellow Hakkas from his ancestral village, his business expanded rapidly on two major fronts — a stable of five major pharmaceutical items under the Tiger brand (Tiger Balm Oil 虎 标 万 金 油, Headache Cure 头 痛 粉, Painkilling Powder 止 痛 散, Mouth Freshener 八 卦 丹 and Wind Mixture 清 快 水) and a chain of “Star” (*Xing/Sing* 星) newspapers in regional localities. The *Sin Chew Jit Poh* 星 洲 日 报 (Singapore, 1929), *Sing Hwa Yih Pao* 星 华 日 报 (Shantou, 1931), *Sing Kong Yih Pao* 星 光 日 报 (Xiamen, 1935), *Sin Chung Jit Poh* 星 中 日 报 (Singapore, 1935), *Sing Yu Jih Pao* 星 渝 日 报 (Chongqing, 1937), *Sing Tao*

Jih Pao 星島日報 (Hong Kong, 1938) and *Sing Pin Jih Pao* 星檳日報 (Penang, 1939) were launched in quick succession. He partly used these newspapers as promotional devices by filling them with advertisements for his Tiger products and with letters to the editors from customers expressing great satisfaction with their effectiveness. Several of the newspapers were not profitable and had to be cross-subsidized with medicinal earnings (Cochran 2001: 176–77; Cochran 2003: 10–17).

It was not just this rapid business empire building that caught the public's imagination. By the early 1930s, Aw had also plunged headlong into a bitter rivalry with Tan Kah Kee 陈嘉庚 over the top leadership position of the Overseas Chinese community, involving local clan associations, recreational clubs, Chinese chambers of commerce and school management boards (Chan 1988/89; Coclanis 1995: 90; King 1992: 289–91). Tan possessed the advantages of having deep local family roots, an early start in community leadership and being a Hokkien, the largest group in an Overseas Chinese community that was essentially divided along dialect-speaking lines. But the mainstay of his business was rubber, and he had been considerably weakened by the wild fluctuations of rubber prices by the late 1920s and early 1930s, which pushed him to the brink of bankruptcy. Aw, coming from the minority Hakka-speaking group and being a new migrant who had just rapidly built up an impressive business empire, was regarded as a brash outsider and an upstart. Their rivalry for influence extended to competing in donations to schools, hospitals and old folks' homes dotted across the various cities of Southeast Asia and China. It also spilled over to a tussle for leadership of the anti-Japanese protest movement and its fund-raising campaigns. The British colonial authorities, which were becoming worried about the increasing fragmentation and the feverish China-oriented nationalist sentiment of the Chinese community, decided to keep to their endorsement of Tan Kah Kee and ignored Aw's clamor for the top leadership position. Nevertheless, they placated Aw by awarding him the Order of the British Empire in May 1938 for his endeavors in the realms of commerce and philanthropy.

Soon after, the British Empire was shaken to its core by the German invasion of Poland and the outbreak of World War II on the European continent. This had a ripple effect on Japan's undeclared war in China (since July 1937) and the strategic calculations of the Japanese imperial army and naval forces, leading eventually to the daring raid on Pearl Harbor and the beginning of the Pacific War in December 1941. Hong Kong fell quickly to invading Japanese forces on Christmas day of the same year and Singapore, the supposedly impregnable British fortress east of the Suez Canal, collapsed in February 1942. Aw's entire business in Singapore and Malaya evaporated and most of the Aw family members hurriedly fled as wartime refugees. Aw was living in Hong Kong during the sudden outbreak of war. He somehow not only emerged unscathed, but went on to have his greatest

stroke of good fortune and took a highly controversial trip to Tokyo to meet with Prime Minister Tojo Hideki.

When the war ended in August 1945 with the Japanese defeat, Aw attempted to quickly resume his business operations and philanthropic activities in China and Southeast Asia. By then China was caught in a full-blown civil war between the Guomindang and the Chinese Communist Party. Aw tried hedging and courting both parties until the Chinese Communists scored a decisive victory in 1949 and nationalized all his assets in China. In Southeast Asia, Aw was able to continue expanding his Tiger Balm and newspaper empire and even to extend his businesses to other economic sectors. However, an illness struck and he passed away in 1954 as one of the richest and most influential members of the Chinese diaspora, bequeathing to his descendants substantial wealth and to the world two spectacular Haw Par Villas 虎豹別墅 (sometimes also known as the Tiger Balm Gardens 虎標萬金油花園) in Singapore and Hong Kong whose construction he had personally conceived and supervised. These villas housed a colorful and enchanting range of statues in human and animal forms, grottos, pagodas, and pavilions; they initially attracted hundreds of thousands of local visitors and tourists yearly, but have recently succumbed to the harsh forces of global capitalist redevelopment (Huang and Hong 2006).

Tiger Aw was thus a man who was not shy of the limelight and who waded into the thick of controversy over at least three major inter-related issues: his public rivalry with Tan Kah Kee for the top leadership position of the Overseas Chinese community, his vacillation between the Guomindang and the Chinese Communist Party, as well as his dealings with the enemy during the Japanese Occupation of Hong Kong. All three reflect Aw's personal trait in negotiating between business and politics during turbulent times, but it is the third, involving the identity issue of patriotism, which is the most pertinent and which has the greatest impact on the way history is being written about the Chinese diaspora.

Aw the “Traitor”: Early Accusations and the Fading of Interest

Even before the War ended, public murmurings had been going around about Aw's wartime relationship with the Japanese. People's attention was drawn to the fact that propaganda materials of the Japanese regime and its puppet authorities had often highlighted the protection of Aw by the Japanese military since the occupation of Hong Kong. It was suggested that Aw must have accepted Wang Jingwei's 汪精衛 collaborationist strategy of peaceful national salvation (*heping jiuguo* 和平救國) and rejected Chiang Kai-shek's 蔣介石 tough stand on waging a war of resistance against Japan (*kangri jiuguo* 抗日救國). There were the accusations that Aw had compromised (*tuoxie* 妥協) with the enemy in order to facilitate the continuation of his business operations. In particular, it was said

that Aw had donned the cloak of a representative of the Overseas Chinese and made a trip to Tokyo, turning himself into a big traitor of the Chinese nation (*da hanjian* 大汉奸). Things came to a head at a meeting of the Xiamen Municipal News Reporters Association on 17 December 1946 during which more than 50 members passed a resolution stating, “*Sing Kong Yih Pao* director Aw Boon Haw has pretended to be an Overseas Chinese representative (*wei chong huaqiao daibiao* 伪充华侨代表) and gone to Tokyo to fawn on the enemy (*meidi meigu* 媚敌). He is still outside of the law and this meeting has resolved to telegraph the Ministry of Defence to arrest and punish him.” This was readily picked up by newspapers the next day and printed as headline news in large font sizes, such as in the *Jiangsheng bao* 江声报 (18 December 1946): “The Newspaper Reporters Association yesterday accused Aw of posing as a representative of the Overseas Chinese and making a trip to Japan to fawn on the enemy,” and in the *Liren ribao* 立人日报: “The Reporters Association in their second meeting yesterday resolved to denounce Aw’s fawning on the enemy (“Shengtao Hu Wenhu meidi shengou huwenhu meigu”) (Ji 1995: 113).

The foundational and substantive account of this issue was penned by someone who had lived through that period as a reporter and who subsequently wrote it from memory. This major memory recall was initially serialized in a Hong Kong newspaper *Zhengwu bao* 正午报 and was published in the early 1960s as a two-volume, 152-page book under the pseudonym of “Old-Brand Reporter” (Laopai Jizhe 老牌记者), *Hu Wenhu fada qushi* 胡文虎发达趣事 (*An Anecdotal History of Aw Boon Haw’s Flourishing Career*).

The value of this account for the investigation of Aw’s wartime patriotism lies partially in its fairly systematic exploration of why there had been swirling suspicions about his loyalty and how this led to him being fiercely attacked by local newspapers when the War ended. Firstly, it notes that many other people managed to escape from Hong Kong despite the sudden invasion (Xu 1997: 34–42; Xie 1994: 10–13, 20–21) and yet Aw and his two sons, Aw Shan 胡山 and Aw Hoe 胡好, chose to stay behind. *Sing Tao Yih Pao* indeed continued its operations, albeit under the new name of *Heung To Yih Pao* 香岛日报, with the two sons rotating as managers. Comments went around that Aw had been doing propaganda work for the Japanese. The author says he has no answer but suggests that there might have been some undue pressure on the Aw family and that the change in name of the newspaper might have been a deliberate move to signal reluctance (Laopai Jizhe [c. early 1960s]: 47). Secondly, Aw even launched another newspaper *Gongzheng bao* 公正报 in Guangzhou, which was then occupied by the Japanese and run by a Chinese provincial governor who was the younger brother of Wang Jingwei’s wife. Aw Shan was the newspaper manager and he landed up on the list of *hanjian* 汉奸 (traitors) at the end of the War and strenuous efforts were needed to get him off the hook (Laopai Jizhe [c. early

1960s]: 81). Again the author is not sure if this constituted collaboration and merely notes that Aw once more avoided putting this newspaper under the “Star” series (Laopai Jizhe [c. early 1960s]: 48).

Thirdly, Aw clearly enjoyed preferential treatment while under detention for a month in a high-class hotel while his mansion with treasures inside was left untouched by the invading troops. After his return to the mansion, he was supplied with whatever food he needed and allowed to keep two cars. The Japanese military ruler Isogai Rensuke (Lieutenant Governor of Hong Kong from December 1941 to February 1944) often met up with Aw for drinks and regularly dispatched high officials to visit him. These visits took place in his mansion under the glare of old photographs of Aw meeting up with Chiang Kai-shek and other prominent Guomindang leaders including Lin Shen 林森, Yu Youren 于右任, Sun Ke 孙科, Li Zongren 李宗仁, Bai Chongxi 白崇禧, He Yingqin 何应钦, and Feng Yuxiang 冯玉祥 (Laopai Jizhe [c. early 1960s]: 64). The author believes that the Japanese gave Aw privileged treatment because Aw had on one occasion, before the outbreak of war, donated money to a Japanese relief fund when Japan had suffered a big flood. The Japanese were very grateful and this act of charity was widely praised in the Japanese media, spilling over to an admiration for his business career and his social status in the Overseas Chinese community (Laopai Jizhe [c. early 1960s]: 74). Fourthly, Aw signed an agreement with a Japanese naval force-related company called Nanshin Koshi 南进公司 accepting it as the sole agent of Tiger products, while contractually allowing Aw’s Eng Aun Tong to continue its retail business in Hong Kong with a limit of one item per customer. Later, Aw concocted a scheme with a rival unit, the Japanese Military Police, to compel the higher Japanese authorities to intervene and return the rights to him (Laopai Jizhe [c. early 1960s]: 66–68). Fifthly, Aw set up another company called Zhongqiao Gongsi 中侨公司 and this must have been done with Japanese approval. Two ships were deployed on the sea lane between Hong Kong and Guangzhou Shiqiao 广州市桥, mainly for transporting the highly profitable Tiger products and salt to the Chinese town and then bringing back rice which Aw and his partners sold cheaply for the benefit of themselves as directors of the company and the hungry Hong Kong public (Laopai Jizhe [c. early 1960s]: 68–69).

The sixth and most important reason for the strong public suspicion was Aw’s visit to Prime Minister Tojo Hideki in Tokyo on a military flight via Guangzhou and Shanghai. Aw went with a secretary who could translate Japanese and boasted that he had been very well-treated. When he indicated his liking for a big, beautiful piece of tiger skin in Tojo’s hall, the latter gave it to him as a present for display on the second floor of the Aw mansion. He also claimed that he had informed Tojo about the 10 mistakes made by Isogai Rensuke, the Japanese governor of Hong Kong, which included not providing adequate food supply in Hong Kong

thereby causing mass panic, Japanese troops cruelly letting out their dogs to bite passers-by, Japanese troops throwing stones indiscriminately at those who were regarded as having broken the curfew, and unreasonable restrictions on the operation of his medicinal business. Aw was said to have asked and received permission from Tojo for a ship to be sent to Thailand and Myanmar to transport rice back to Hong Kong. However, the scheme was somehow not implemented because American bombers had intensified their patrolling and bombing over the high seas and even the Hong Kong city center, forcing Aw to take refuge in Macau (Laopai Jizhe [c. early 1960s]: 72–73).

The old-hand reporter also recalls that Aw tried to take the sting out of some of the public criticisms against him by claiming that his huge financial remittance back to China had helped the Chinese economy. He goes on at some length to explain why the Tiger Balm business was so spectacularly successful during the War, yielding Aw a fabulous wartime fortune. The crux of the matter had to do with the currency fluctuations (between the Japanese military coupon, Hong Kong dollar and Chinese dollar), scarcity of goods and Tiger Balm being both a necessity with medicinal properties and a convenient barter good with value retention and transferability (Laopai Jizhe [c. early 1960s]: 69–70). Making a market judgment that the Chinese dollar would be resilient in the face of inflation and likely to strengthen after the War, Aw chose to lodge his big pot of gold with the Chinese banks in China and often portrayed this as an act of patriotism. At the end of the War, the subsequent hyperinflation, currency crash and forced conversion into the abortive golden *yuan* scheme apparently reduced his huge deposit of about C\$30 million to a miserable HK\$55.20 by the late 1940s (Laopai Jizhe [c. early 1960s]: 72).

As the book is written largely from memory and gives no citations, the accuracy of many of the details in this pen-named account is difficult to ascertain. Overall, the book's claim that it has come from the hands of a senior reporter who is knowledgeable about that contemporary period does appear to be convincing. It is by far the most comprehensive early account of Aw and is the foundational piece from which many subsequent publications have borrowed fairly heavily, often without due acknowledgment.

However, with every passing year, the strong suspicions and public criticism against Aw which the book has noted dissipated rather rapidly, and the topic of Aw possibly having turned traitor faded more and more from public attention. There were inherent difficulties in framing Aw as a traitor. His notable philanthropic record and heavy involvement in patriotic anti-Japanese fund-raising activities before the fall of Hong Kong had provided him with a certain degree of protection. More to the point, the entire spectrum of the governing political authorities, ranging from the Guomindang to the Chinese Communists, and from the British authorities in Hong Kong to that in Singapore, neither placed him on any official

list of traitors to be arrested and punished nor publicly labeled him as a collaborationist for social castigation in the immediate months following the Japanese surrender.

Guomindang leaders who already had a close relationship with Aw going back to at least a decade instead readily signaled their acceptance of the postwar Aw and there was never any intention to cold-shoulder him for his dealings with the Japanese during the War. Indeed, one major focus of postwar interactions between the Guomindang and him was his attempt to put in place a grand Fujian Economic Reconstruction Plan to help with the province's postwar economic reconstruction, which encompassed an extremely wide range of activities including banking, insurance, shipping, mining, textiles, the chemical industry, power plants and fisheries. In August 1946 Aw rallied more than 50 Fujian leaders to form a preparatory committee for a Fujian Economic Construction Limited Company. Organizational charts and a distribution quota of capital fund-raising for Singapore, Malaya, and several other Southeast Asian countries, India, Hong Kong, Shanghai and other Chinese cities were drawn up. Guomindang governmental backing at both the national and provincial levels was sought and Aw managed to hold a launching ceremony in Xiamen on 15 November 1946. A 15-member core of the preparatory committee was appointed. This included Aw, who was tasked with approaching the Guomindang government for approval to set up a Fujian Reconstruction Bank. Chiang Kai-shek sent a congratulatory telegram on this occasion, as did other top Guomindang leaders including Chen Guofu 陈果夫 and Chen Cheng 陈诚 (*Hu Wenhui xiansheng liuzhi jinwu shouchen zhuankan* 1947: 12–13; Chan 1998: 39–43; Sun 2004: 89–93).²

Similarly, before the fateful ascent of the Chinese Communist Party to power in October 1949, Aw had maintained friendly contacts with the party even while he was closely aligned with the Guomindang leaders. In 1938, in the midst of the Sino-Japanese War and on the occasion of Aw's launching of his Hong Kong newspaper *Sing Tao Jih Poh*, Zhou Enlai 周恩来, Zhu De 朱德 and Ye Jianying 叶剑英 sent their own calligraphic congratulatory messages.³ When Aw attended the February 1941 People's Political Council meeting in wartime Chongqing, Zhou and Ye visited him to explain party policies. A Chinese Communist newspaper also then carried a report of his philanthropic activities, in which Aw was acclaimed as a man of kind heart and noble mind (Chan 1998: 43, 46). After the Japanese surrender, the Chinese Communist Party did not make any formal pronouncement portraying Aw in a bad light. In fact, after the Chinese Communists swept into power, Aw made some positive overtures to the new Beijing regime. Through his newspapers he said that "he was touched and moved, and respected the upright character of the Communists and their spirit of endurance in adversity," while expressing worry about possible future corruption (Chan 1998: 45). He also made at least three attempts to get into direct contact

with the top CCP leadership committee, expressing his support for the newly established People's Republic of China. The relations apparently turned sour only when Aw and the new Communist local authorities in Guangdong could neither settle the thorny issue of whether Aw had substantively evaded business income taxation, nor agree on the quantum of subscription for the victory bonds launched by the new regime. It was only in April 1950 that there was an open rupture in the relationship and Aw's entire assets in China were nationalized (Chan 1998: 46; King 1992: 346; Ji 1995: 219).

The British authorities in Hong Kong and Singapore were ambivalent about Aw's wartime involvement and there was never any formal accusation of Aw having been a collaborator with the Japanese and a traitor against the British Empire. When the War ended, Britain's immediate concern in Hong Kong was with the aggressiveness of some Guomindang agents rushing to the island and branding people randomly as traitors in an exercise which often was exploitative, and carried out for personal economic gains (Xie 1996). The returned colonial government was also most anxious to find ways of rebuilding its local gentry support base, leading eventually to only a very mild purge of community leaders who had directly participated in Japanese-sponsored committees. Aw had held no such official postings and was regarded as among the "more peripheral figures" who "received a complete absolution" (Snow 2003: 195–96, 282–84). Upon the Japanese surrender and after his quick return to Singapore, the British extended to Aw the privilege of flying him to Yangon in a transport plane so that he could be reunited early with his refugee family. Another Royal Air Force plane flew him back to Singapore's Tengah airbase and the base commandant even provided him with a staff car for the drive back to his Nassim Road home (King 1992: 335). His mansion had its jade treasures stripped by marauding Japanese troops during the occupation and it was to Aw's surprise that Major Anthony Dumont of the British Military Administration came knocking on his door one day and reported the unexpected recovery of 20 crates of his treasures in a warehouse in Tanjong Pagar. Dumont, who was a ranking officer in the War Crimes Commission which later tried and hanged General Yamashita and other war criminals, subsequently became a friend of the Aw family and a frequent visitor to Aw's so-called White House in Nassim Road on all major social occasions (King 1992: 337–38). In 1949, as Aw's newspapers made pro-Communist pronouncements in an effort to position themselves for the final outcome of the civil war in China, the British in Singapore who were fighting a Communist insurrection in the Malayan jungle slapped an entry ban on Aw but this was quickly lifted in less than three months (Cochran 2003: 1, 24). By 1950, the British had allowed Aw to expand his business greatly through the launching of two new English dailies, *The Hong Kong Standard* and *The Singapore Standard*, as well as his much-desired Chung Khiaw Bank 崇 侨 银 行 (King 1992: 343–44, 348–50). They also awarded him the

Associated Knight of the Venerable Order of St John of Jerusalem in 1950 for substantive contributions to the Hong Kong St John Ambulance (King 1992: 341–42; Sim 1950: 4; Lee and Chow 1997: 2).

That absence of concern from official agencies, whether it was the Guomindang, the Chinese Communists or the British, must have provided Aw with another veneer of protection, muting public criticism and facilitating a general fading of the issue from the collective memory. Together with the passage of time, the reversal of the American postwar policy toward Japan, the latter's subsequent economic recovery, and a growing Southeast Asian dependency on Japanese direct foreign investment, negative discourses on Aw were pushed into near oblivion. It is as if the postwar public was seized by collective amnesia and many later publications made little or no reference to the issue.

Indeed his wartime conduct is conspicuously absent from many key biographical entries, such as in Victor Sim, ed., *Biographies of Prominent Chinese in Singapore* (Singapore: Nan Kok, 1950), p. 4, and Lo Hsiang-lin 罗香林 “Hu Wenhu xiansheng zhuan 胡文虎先生传” (“A Biography of Mr. Aw Boon Haw”), in *Xinxiwang zhoukan* 新希望周刊 56 (14 Mar. 1955): 3.⁴ As for Ao Rubo 区如柏, who wrote a series of six investigative journalist articles in the mid-1980s on the Aw family, she essentially skipped over Aw's wartime dealings, except to mention briefly that Aw had turned down a Japanese offer to be the mayor (*shizhang* 市长) of Hong Kong during the War, preferring instead to live there as an ordinary city dweller (Ao c. 1995: 184). Kang Jifu 康吉父's [pseudonym for Ly Singko 李星可 who was a senior Chinese newspaper editor in Singapore and later detained without trial in the 1970s] *Hu Wenhu zhuan* 胡文虎传 (*Biography of Aw Boon Haw*) (Hong Kong: Longmen wenhua, 1984) is supposed to be a 221-page book on the life and times of Aw. But its treatment of the war years is extremely thin and poorly researched, in contrast to the author's detailed knowledge about developments in the newspaper world. The thorny issue of Aw's patriotic credentials was avoided simply on the unsatisfactory basis that no one knew where Aw had been during those years when Hong Kong was occupied (Kang 1984: 90; Kang 1987: 200; Wu 2004: 90–91). Other Hong Kong publications dealing specifically with the Occupation years have also been generally silent (Buping Shanren 1972; Ye et al. 1982).

Money, Politics and History Rewriting: Process of Rehabilitation and Elevation

This situation was noticeably reversed by the 1980s. The shift can be traced to the fact that Aw's entrepreneurial flair and marketing ingenuity were just the right kind of business model for the promotion of late 20th-century global capitalism and consumer culture. The growth of capitalism and consumerism received a

significant boost and acquired a global dimension with the economic take-off of several Asian countries from the 1980s. Punctuating the air then was the notion of an East Asian Economic Miracle spearheaded by a mature Japanese economy and underpinned by a brood of emerging young dragons (Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore) and baby tigers (Thailand, Malaysia, Philippines and Indonesia). In discourses seeking to unveil the cultural values which underpinned this development and to understand the role played by the influential diasporic network of Chinese communities scattered throughout Asia and the rest of the world, the historical example of Aw Boon Haw and his regional business empire became once again a focal point of interest.

The root cause of this strong revival of interest can be traced more precisely to Communist China's opening and the successful launching of market reforms from 1978 under the new leadership of Deng Xiaoping 邓小平. As part of the new economic strategy of wooing foreign investment from the Chinese communities abroad, a surge of interest in Overseas Chinese leaders of the past who had had intimate links with China was unleashed. Aw was one such figure at the center of attention, especially as his daughter Sally Aw Sian 胡仙 had taken control of the remnants of Aw's newspaper business empire and had done exceptionally well, ranking as one of the wealthiest women in Asia (until her business demise later at the turn of the millennium). Moreover, a new sense of urgency to link up with Overseas Chinese leaders was added when the Sino-British Declaration was signed on 26 September 1984 after tough negotiations between Beijing and London, over the return of Hong Kong to China in July 1997.

Xiang Nan 项南 who was the First Party Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party provincial branch in Fujian in the 1980s emerged as the key figure who carefully orchestrated the rehabilitation and elevation of Aw. Xiang was no ordinary party cadre. His father had been one of the earliest to join the Chinese Communist Party in the western Fujian region. During the war of resistance against Japan, Xiang too joined the Communist underground and worked his way up the ranks of the Communist Youth Corps. His career suffered when he became a victim of discrimination during the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957–58 and the early part of the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s. He made a political comeback in the 1970s via the promotion of the mechanization of Chinese agriculture and belonged to one of the early batches of Chinese Communist leaders who had the opportunity to travel to the United States, Great Britain, France, Italy and Denmark to observe the workings of the world economy. By December 1980, he had closely identified himself with the market reformist camp of Deng Xiaoping and was appointed as the powerful party secretary of Fujian province. His tenure, till retirement upon reaching the old-age limit of 65 in February 1986, was marked by his daring attempt at reviewing past cases of political injustice, the opening of the provincial economy to market reforms and foreign investment,

as well as the active cultivation of Chinese communities overseas. In retirement, he chaired the Chinese Foundation for Assisting the Poor 中国扶贫基金会 and lived in Beijing, but remained influential in Fujian society. His dare-to-do spirit has been immortalized by a two-volume, 902-page biography which portrays him as “an epochal wise and brave man” who “brought benefits to the people when he was alive and has given wisdom even after his death” (Hu 2004: dedication page, 14, 441–48).

From the beginning, Xiang Nan knew that the handling of Aw Boon Haw’s case would not be an easy task and was aware that the new political climate of reform and liberalization was only in its infancy. Despite the general silence on Aw Boon Haw in mainland China for the preceding 20 years, the historical burden and unarticulated feelings against Aw were not something Xiang Nan wished to ignore. His party had after all confiscated all of Aw’s assets in China in 1950 and there was a great deal of political sensitivity over his relationship with Chiang Kai-shek, rivalry with Tan Kah Kee, and dealings with the Japanese during the War. Xiang began by returning the single piece of property, Haw Par Villa, in Aw’s native village to his descendants in July 1981. This was soon followed by the return of all other properties in Fujian province in February 1983, a move which was accompanied by a proclamation and dispatch of official invitations to Aw’s relatives, descendants and former employees to visit China. Xiang categorically said in an interview that “the critique on the Aw family was not fair and the handling of the Aw family properties was inappropriate in the past due to the influence of ‘leftist’ ideology. Now we are ready to correct our past mistakes” (*Fujian qiaoxiangbao* 10 Feb. 1983).⁵

The tempo of reversal of the official stance quickened and shifted to the ideological and intellectual arena in mid-1985 when a wide array of scholars and writers were mobilized to produce an avalanche of studies on Aw. At the heart of this operation was the Aw Boon Haw Research Unit, located at the Longyan Teachers College 龙岩师专 (with the participation of Huadong Normal University 华东师范大学). Publications poured out with three special editions of the *Journal of Longyan Teachers College* (renamed as *Aw Boon Haw Studies*), devoted entirely to articles on Aw: July 1985, April 1987 and August 1988. Many of these articles were later collated and reprinted in a monograph (Li 1992). State television stations were also mobilized in September and December 1987 to air two documentary programs depicting Aw in a favorable light (Li 1988: 1–2).

A high point was reached when this research unit worked with party and government officials to organize in September 1992 a major academic conference celebrating the 110th Anniversary of Aw’s birth, an event which coincided with the opening ceremony of an Aw Boon Haw Exhibition Room on the ground floor of the returned Haw Par Villa. The success of this occasion served as a signal to Aw Sian herself to make a trip to the capital Beijing in November to be officially

received by both President Jiang Zemin 江泽民 and Prime Minister Li Peng 李鹏, an occasion symbolizing the unequivocal rehabilitation of the Aw family by the top leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. This was followed closely by her first journey back to Aw's ancestral village in March 1993, with a spectacular entrance and departure by helicopter amidst cheering from an army of school children, farmers and officials. A second trip was made in September the following year when she personally opened the Aw Boon Haw Memorial Hall (a complete conversion of the old Haw Par Villa), with the hall's name written in Li Peng's calligraphy and carved in marble. The Aw Boon Haw Foundation was simultaneously launched to see to the generous funding of the refurbishment and operation of the Memorial Hall and numerous schools. By August 1998 when the Aw Boon Haw Foundation published a glossy volume to celebrate its fifth anniversary, it had disbursed as much as RMB\$16,598,000 and the Foundation's official "advisor" Xiang Nan had just passed away (Hu Wenhu Jijinhui 1998: passim).⁶ The critical leadership role which Xiang had played was duly acknowledged by the large number of his photographs splattered across the pages of the commemorative volume. That tome, especially the final passages in the epilogue, aptly reminds us that the frantic chain of Xiang Nan-guided activities was not just about Tiger Aw. It was a two-generation enterprise to place on historical record Aw Boon Haw and Sally Aw Sian's "true feelings and real contributions emanating from a duo-generational love for the country, village and people" (Hu Wenhu Jijinhui 1998: 143).⁷

Aw the "Patriotic Overseas Chinese Leader": Emergence of a New Dominant Template

Given the underlying political, economic and personal agenda, it is not surprising that the resurgence of interest in Aw Boon Haw resulted in an increasingly positive spin on the man and a new story emerged to firmly refute all accusations of treachery and to embrace him as a true Chinese patriot. This gradual but steady shift can be observed in the extensive publications related to or directly inspired by the Aw Boon Haw Research Unit located at the Longyan Teachers College. The first two issues of its special studies on Aw consciously remained anchored on the Deng Xiaoping-inspired note of caution about the need to stay on solid empirical ground and to seek truth from fact. The main focus of the early discussion was on less contentious issues such as tracing the family trees of the Aw clan, the growth of his Tiger Balm and newspaper businesses as well as his extensive charity and school-building activities. When writers needed to grapple with the thorny issue of Aw's wartime activities in Hong Kong, they leaned on the discovery of Aw's personal statements issued in November 1943 about his Tokyo visit and drew the (early) conclusion that the visit was his only mistake (*shiwu* 失误) and a black

mark in his personal history (*ta lishi shang de wudian* 他历史上的污点). Readers were urged to bear the mistake in mind but to see it within the larger perspective so as to arrive at a final positive assessment (Liu 1985; Chen 1985: 1–2, 11–37; Chen 1987: 24–28).

However, the tone of all the writings began to change and the middle ground between black and white had slipped away roughly by the time of the publication of the third issue (August 1988) of the studies on Aw. Two critical points were henceforth eagerly seized upon to absolve him totally. First, it was pointed out that Aw did not assume any official posts in Hong Kong during the Japanese Occupation, and that such allegations were now shown to have no empirical basis (Kong 1992: 6–7, 75; Guan 1993: 171–72).⁸ The second point is with regard to the secret minutes of the Aw-Tojo meeting which were located in Japan and translated for the Chinese audience. Despite these minutes being open to varying interpretations, the team which presented the findings leaned heavily on them as definitive proof of Aw's innocence. Accusations of Aw as a "Han traitor who sold out the nation" were now judged to be completely baseless. Rather, Aw's trip to Japan had been a bait thrown out by the Japanese and Aw merely socialized with them a little. He had in fact cleverly foiled the conspiracy of the Japanese, laid down his own justifiable demands, never been injurious to the interest of the Chinese people but offered a ray of hope for the Overseas Chinese in the various occupied territories (Li 1988: 11–12; Li and Wang 2000: 109–302; Kong and Hong 1992). The Tokyo conversation was now emphatically defended as the most decisive evidence of Aw's integrity, showing up all the injustice inflicted on him by previous suggestions that he had "fawned on the enemy" and should thus be labeled a "Chinese traitor" (Hong and Kong 1993: 184–193; Kong 2001).⁹ It was also presented as strong evidence of Aw's true colours as a patriot. From this point on, caution was thrown to the wind and the momentum of elevating Aw to the high podium reached its climax. The epitaph of him being a "Patriotic Overseas Chinese Leader" (*aiguo huaqiao lingxiu* 爱国华侨领袖) was inscribed on a stone tablet placed at the entrance to the Aw Boon Haw Memorial Hall and the last couplet of an eight-line English introduction to the exhibits extols: "He was a patriot leader of overseas Chinese; His story will be recorded and respected forever." That became the dominant template for a fair deal of recycling of ideas, plagiarism and even fertile imaginations.

That elevation of Aw to a previously unforeseen plane is noticeable in the 1989 full-length 482-page biography on Aw: Zhang Yonghe 张永和's *Hu Wenhu* 胡文虎 (*Aw Boon Haw*). Zhang was an Indonesian Overseas Chinese who was born in Sumatra in 1941. He went to China in 1947 with his mother as a little boy after his father was killed during the War, and became a forestry worker in Aw's ancestral village, subsequently turning to writing. He had started doing research and writing about Aw in the early 1960s but all his source materials and

draft manuscript were destroyed when he came under attack during the turbulent Cultural Revolution. After his rehabilitation in 1979, he became a reporter and restarted his Aw project. His manuscript had initially been rejected by the publisher in the early 1980s. It was only after the launch of extended market reforms and a new national objective to attract Overseas Chinese investment that parts of his manuscript were serialized in a literary magazine *Xiamen wenxue* 厦门文学 from January to August 1988 (*Minxibao* 25 June 1988), with the book itself being published in 1989 (Zhang 1989). The publication was very well-received and hailed as a spectacular literary breakthrough and history revisionism at its best; the author became famous overnight. With some help, Zhang even converted it into a drama script and the play was staged in mid-1989 in various localities throughout Fujian and Guangdong provinces (Tu 1992: 51). The recasting of Aw Boon Haw as a prominent Hakka leader and Overseas Chinese patriot was also lapped up by the Singapore Hakka community which provided additional funding and the editorial expertise of Xie Zuozhi 谢佐芝 to repackage and republish Zhang's book as *Hu Wenhu zhuan* 胡文虎传 (*Biography of Hu Wenhu*), to commemorate the 111th anniversary of Aw's birth (Zhang 1993).¹⁰ Zhang went on to secure a job as a researcher in the Longyan Local Gazette Office and the Overseas Chinese-related Jinan University 暨南大学, penning at least three other biographies on prominent overseas political leaders with Hakka lineage: Taiwan's Lee Teng Hui 李登辉 (1989), Philippines' Corazon Aquino 科拉松·阿基诺 (1991) and Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew 李光耀 (1993).

In terms of history writing and assessing Aw's wartime patriotism, Zhang made two contributions. Firstly, he highlighted the need to bear in mind the global war situation which had turned very unfavorable toward Japan by 1943, thereby diluting the rationale for any collaborationist initiatives. Secondly, he helped to publicize the discovery of a personal statement issued by Aw in November 1943 which he reprinted *ad verbatim* in his book (*Quanmin xinribao* 26 Nov. 1943; Zhang 1989: 438–40).¹¹ Other than these, the value of his book as a serious historical enterprise is dubious. While claiming to have certain expertise and aspirations for history writing, he frankly admits in his book that he is also treating the project as a medium for artistic expression. His Aw Boon Haw is intended to be “both a historical figure and an image of art” (Zhang 1989: 51). As a result, the final product is a highly fictionalized account with artistic license at full gallop. Monologues and dialogues are splattered all over and several of the characters are fictional. To spice up his account, even the wife of the Japanese Prime Minister Tojo has been crafted to come across as beautifully dressed and well-poised like a classic beauty walking out of a painting when she personally welcomes Aw and then serves as the translator during that crucial meeting (Zhang 1989: 428)! The revisionist desire to turn Aw into a full-blooded patriot is visible all over. In making his final decision to go to Tokyo, Aw is said to have declared, “Tojo

has offered an olive branch. I must grab it and use it to beat him brutally. Most importantly, I must get him to agree to lift the ban on rice. It is only when everyone is well-fed that they get the strength to challenge the Japanese devils” (Zhang 1989: 418).

In line with the resurgence of interest in Aw, Sam King, who had worked under Tiger Aw’s son in one of his newspapers for three years before leaving for Britain in the early 1950s to further his journalistic experience, wrote a 368-page English-language biography on Aw in 1992 (without scholarly apparatus and with constructed dialogues). The book has a few pages devoted to the war years and it too leans toward a strong endorsement of Aw’s patriotism (King 1992: 328–31). In this account, the Japanese are supposed to have tried to brainwash him, switching between coaxing and threats, and even offered him membership in the Hong Kong governing council as he was regarded as a “very special person.” Sam King has Aw replying that “I am deeply honoured” but “as you know, I am a businessman. I know nothing about government. I don’t like politics.” After more veiled threats, Aw eventually agreed to start a company as a token gesture to import rice and other foodstuff for the Imperial Japanese Army, and to supply whatever surplus there was to the public. His intention was to appease the enemy only and not to make money. The Japanese in return allowed him to continue selling his Tiger products and newspapers.

Shortly after his release from initial detention in a hotel, Aw was flown to Tokyo “on bomber for a familiarization tour of Japan” and “accorded VIP treatment.” Although the Japanese were determined to win him over, Aw was said to have returned to Hong Kong after three weeks “with his views intact,” reminding his son that “A Chinese must always give his allegiance to his mother country no matter under whose rule he lives.” To reinforce the underlying message about Aw’s patriotism, Sam King immediately follows up with an account on how some Japanese visitors to Aw’s mansion had asked him about the picture of Chiang Kai-shek hanging in his mansion:

The Tiger looked his visitor straight in the eye and replied, “I am Chinese. He is my leader. If you want to talk peace with China, he and his government are the people to talk to, not Wang Ching Wei.” Wang was the puppet head of the government set up by the Japanese in occupied China. The Japanese understood what patriotism was. They themselves had pledged their lives and unquestioning obedience to their emperor (King 1992: 331).

Sam King has therefore evoked both the infamous wartime patriotism of the Japanese toward their emperor and the negative image of the Wang collaborationist government in order to project Aw as a true Chinese patriot.

That swing toward an unequivocal heroic image is the dominant history template which emerged from a potent mix of money, politics and history rewriting in the 1980s and 1990s. It is a template which many publications have

used, but there are a few exceptions. Only moderately successful in struggling against the trend is John S.N. Chan's 1998 journal article on Aw. Being published only recently, it has the advantage of having access to almost all the primary and secondary source materials discussed previously. Its coverage is broad and it manages to synthesize all the major writings as well as recently unearthed primary sources into a coherent piece of analysis. Both Chinese- and English-language sources are extensively used. Most importantly, unlike many of the writings mentioned so far, it does not engage in the artistic construction of monologues, dialogues, and events but adheres fairly diligently to the scholarly apparatus of citation when passages and ideas have been borrowed.¹² Conscious attempts are also made, though not convincingly enough, to develop a wider frame of analysis by placing Aw under the nationalistic influences of opium fighter Lin Zexu 林则徐 and revolutionary leader Sun Yat Sen 孙中山 and by developing a so-called "philosophical concept of dualism in terms of mutual benefit." Aw's wartime activities in Hong Kong are mainly examined in the section on "A Victim or Villain," but this section ends rather abruptly without any rounding up (Chan 1998: 31–35). John Chan inclines toward a positive overall assessment that "Aw was a patriot. Patriotism was the driving force behind his all out effort to rebuild China after the Northern Expedition in 1928, and again after the Second World War in 1946 as well as his strong support for the war of resistance against the invasion of the Japanese Imperial Forces" (Chan 1998: 30). But his concluding passage presents a much more guarded view:

Perhaps, the greatest loss in his life was his trip to Tokyo where he had a meeting with Tojo to discuss the shipment of Burmese rice to starving areas. He had long been suspected of collaborating with the Japanese Occupation forces. Nevertheless, the battle of wits he engaged [in] with Tojo showed that Aw was not the type of Wang Jing-wei. He was, in fact, there to beard the lion in his den at high risk, so to speak Whether Aw was a victim or villain was something of the past. Whatever the case, he had been put to the test in an extremely brutalized political environment, and the most dehumanized era in the history of China (Chan 1998: 49).

A more direct questioning of the dominant template came from Mo Shixiang 莫世祥 and Chen Hong 陈红 who duly note how mainland writers, in particular Hong Buren and Kong Yongsong, have given an inappropriately positive spin on Aw's image by an inaccurate reading of the primary sources (Mo and Chen 1997: 236).¹³ They agree that Aw was obviously not a traitor because he would otherwise have used the meeting with Tojo to secure even more political and economic advantages. But they also reject the notion that Aw had displayed the "nationalist integrity of a patriotic overseas Chinese leader" because he had nonetheless agreed to the wartime economic cooperation with the Japanese forces. They express an admiration for Aw's skill in maneuvering the situation to avoid becoming a traitor and still ended up being valued by the Japanese, as well as

gaining a personal fortune and achieving charitable goals. Avoiding the traitor-patriot binary, their final assessment of Aw is simply that he was a capable businessman moulded by a highly commercialized Hong Kong (Mo and Chen 1997: 244–45). This critique of the hagiography seems to be borne out in a re-examination of crucial primary sources.

From the Tiger's Mouth: Re-examination of Aw's Personal Clarifications

Since the new and positive twist to the image of Aw has purportedly rested on the discovery and problematic reading of important sources, a review of such materials is in order. Two items will be reviewed in this section. One is a personal statement issued by Aw on 22 November 1943, even before the end of the Japanese Occupation of Hong Kong, and the other is a passage inside a 1947 souvenir magazine in celebration of Aw's 65th birthday. Both are worth recapitulating here as they constitute an independent, contemporaneous and personalized line of discourse. Comments in italics have been added and placed within parentheses for analytical purposes.

Apparently, after returning from his trip to Tokyo, Aw received many pressing queries from relatives and friends asking him why he had gone and what he had done over there. There were even pro-Japanese newspaper articles which came out publicly praising Aw for having made the trip as he had been grateful for “Japanese protection in Hong Kong” and had decided to “lean toward the banner of peaceful national salvation” and “push for the beginning of a peace movement” (*Quanmin xinribao* 26 Nov. 1943).¹⁴ But people were clearly suspicious and Aw found it tiring to respond to all the inquiries. Hence, four months later, he decided to issue a personal statement entitled “Why the Trip to Tokyo?” (“Heshi fu Dongjing?” 何事赴东京) as his way of parrying those questions (*Quanmin xinribao* 26 Nov. 1943).¹⁵

In this statement, Aw claimed that an “influential person” from Japan [*youli renshi* 有力人士; *not necessarily from the Japanese secret police as suggested in several revisionist accounts to impute coercion and lessen Aw's guilt*] had visited him and toured his mansion. As their casual conversation turned to the topic of charity work, Aw put forward the idea that if the surplus rice in Myanmar, Thailand and Annam, all of which then under Japanese control, could be shipped to China, then the price of rice would drop and many people who were suffering from food shortages would be relieved of their hunger [*admitting his own initiative in raising the topic of rice and using charitable intentions as the rationale and agenda for his trip; no coercion is implied*]. The visitor agreed and after going back to Japan to speak to the relevant authorities, returned to let Aw know that his grand wish to bring about relief to the hungry Chinese was admirable, and asked if Aw would

be prepared to make a trip to Tokyo. Aw felt that since there was a food problem affecting the people, he “generously” consented to go [*stressing again charity as the impetus and making the trip on a voluntary basis without coercion*]. Prime Minister Tojo then gave him a good reception as he had gone for the purpose of relieving the public panic over food [*admitting preferential treatment*]. He agreed to give Aw the right “without any cost” [*misleading, as the Minutes of Meeting clearly indicates an exchange deal for precious wartime resources*] to ship the surplus rice from Myanmar to various places so as to provide relief. Regarding the problem of transportation, if there had been no ships available, then the relevant authorities would have to be consulted for a solution.

The personal statement goes on to identify “freedom” for patriotic Overseas Chinese as the second major item of discussion [*claiming leadership role over the Overseas Chinese*]. Aw said he had told Tojo frankly that it was natural for the Overseas Chinese in various parts of Nanyang to be loyal, talented and to love China [*positioning himself as the spokesman of Overseas Chinese patriotism*]. If Japan had treated China like a brother, then it would not have hated those Overseas Chinese who were deeply patriotic and they in turn would have channeled part of their love for the motherland to East Asia. If their freedom could be restored, then they would have done their very best for East Asia in the future [*aligning himself and the Overseas Chinese with the Japanese agenda of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere*]. Aw hoped that those Overseas Chinese assets which had yet to be audited and confiscated could be treated leniently. This would be very helpful for the revival of Overseas Chinese commerce and the development of Nanyang resources. The Japanese Prime Minister agreed to accept these suggestions.

Regarding remittances from the Overseas Chinese, Aw said he felt the present method and amount were too restrictive. The method of money collection was different from the usual practices of the Overseas Chinese. He therefore proposed to Tojo that Overseas Chinese capital should be collected for the preparation of opening a bank to be managed by the Overseas Chinese themselves. Tojo agreed in principle and the details of implementation would naturally be discussed with the relevant authorities before implementation [*deploying a public narrative to win over the Overseas Chinese communities and pushing for his long-cherished dream of acquiring a bank; this issue of remittance and banking is conspicuously absent in the official Minutes of Meeting*].

On problems relating to Hong Kong, Aw said he had already shared many thoughts with the Japanese governor in the past. He had also spoken to Tojo about them. After his return, he discussed concrete ideas for implementation with the Japanese authorities [*participating indirectly in the governance of Japanese-occupied Hong Kong*]. As for the problem of rice, Aw said a substantive implementation plan was being drafted. Once a solution to shipping problems was found, Aw said

he would travel to Nanyang to discuss with various local authorities. He would then also try to resolve the issues of Overseas Chinese patriotism and remittances. These, he claimed, were the facts of his trip to Tokyo and, that he had prepared this account as outsiders might not be aware of all of them. Henceforth, Aw said he would prefer to be excused from further questioning.

The November 1943 personal statement did not stand alone. Three years later in January 1947, when Aw's "Star" newspapers staff members decided to publish a souvenir magazine in celebration of their founder's 65th birthday, they inserted an account of Aw's wartime activities and trip to Tokyo, except that this time there was seemingly greater confidence and a heroic spin was even added. Although written by the newspaper staff and issued in the name of Haw Par Brothers Limited, Eng Aun Tong, and the Star Newspaper Group, this high-profile birthday account must have been vetted and endorsed by Aw and his family members and can thus be regarded as an official or personal clarification.¹⁶

In this birthday celebration version, Aw was unabashedly portrayed as a very brave man (The following account from *Hu Wenhu xiansheng liuzhi jinwu shoucheng zhuan* 1947: 14–16). At the outbreak of war, Hong Kong came immediately under intense air raids and naval assault landings. While most residents were fleeing, Aw opted to stay put in his mansion until he was evicted by British soldiers who wished to use the high ground of his mansion for defense purposes [*claiming bravery but has actually invited suspicions on why he chose not to be among the 520,000 people who escaped from Hong Kong in the first three months with the help of the Guomindang and the Chinese Communist Party*]. Even after he had been relocated to stay with his relatives, he refused to take cover and chose to stay calmly in the garden to watch the cross-harbor gun battle between Kowloon and the Hong Kong island, amidst "artillery shells flying overhead." Aw was captured only after Japanese troops had fanned out to hunt for him and forced him to come out by using his son Aw Hoe as a hostage [*not corroborated by any other accounts. Probably an attempt to raise the profile and reputation of Aw Hoe who was then groomed as heir apparent to Aw's business empire*]. Upon being captured, he was detained in the Hotel Gloucester for three days and later was apparently moved with other prominent leaders to Hotel Peninsula for the following week. He was put on the second floor while the British governor was detained on the third floor. Later, he was moved again to Hotel Hong Kong. Japanese staff officers were sent direct from Tokyo to interrogate him, grilling him on whether he had financially assisted the war against Japan [*claiming tough interrogation and the price he paid for being patriotic*]. He replied that being Chinese and a patriot, he had naturally contributed to the Chinese war effort. When asked who the leader of China was, he unequivocally answered that "Chiang Kai-shek is my country's only leader" [*defending his wartime patriotism as well as absolute loyalty to Chiang and distancing himself from the collaborationist Wang*].

This account also puts forward the claim that Aw lost all freedom during his house arrest. He was later allowed to return to stay in his mansion, but he remained under constant surveillance by “secret agents of Taiwanese origin” [*denying preferential treatment*]. Aw was proud that he did not buckle and even stood firm about not tearing down the huge photographs hanging in his mansion which he had taken with Chiang Kai-shek and other key central leaders [*reinforcing his bravery and loyalty*]. The account clarifies that Aw’s trip to Tokyo to meet with Prime Minister Tojo was to complain about the “five big crimes,” which included the brutality of the Japanese governor in Hong Kong and the greed of the Japanese finance minister who was unreasonably squeezing the Overseas Chinese. Tojo agreed. The finance minister was sacked [*inflating his influence and success of the trip even though there is no corroborative evidence to suggest that the finance minister’s subsequent departure from office was due to Aw’s complaint*]. The account states that these were acts of bravery that nobody had dared to do. Aw alone had the guts to put his life on the line and presented his reasoned arguments forcefully [*reinforcing his bravery*].

It further reveals that Aw had also given financial assistance to about a thousand Hong Kong University students and other cultured youths to escape to China to study or perform services [*again deflecting suspicions about his patriotism*]. The Japanese authorities soon found out about this and telegraphed the Military Police in Hong Kong to investigate the matter and put a stop to it. Moreover, there was the special occasion when the Occupation authority was forcing people in Hong Kong to contribute to the construction of a Shinto shrine. It approached the wealthy Aw who steadfastly refused to contribute on the grounds that the proposed shrine was meant for the commemoration of those Japanese killed in the battle for Hong Kong and that went against his Buddhist and charitable principles. The enemy coaxed and threatened but Aw refused to cough up a single cent [*repeating the twin themes of loyalty and bravery*]. The account insists at this point that there were no cover-ups and that as those factual incidents had happened only recently, the people in Hong Kong could always check on them.

It also informs its readers that Aw had somehow cleverly anticipated the coming of the Pacific War. At the point when China was alone in the thick of war against Japan, Aw had the foresight to remit all his capital from Singapore back to the national banks of China, while his money in Yangon was moved to Kunming. Aw was said to have never liked placing deposits with foreign banks as he believed in “returning to the society what one takes from it.” It was an enormous sum of money and a valuable contribution to the War and construction effort in China [*defending his patriotism and financial value of his contributions*]. Moreover, seven months before the fall of Singapore, he had issued a warning in *Sin Chew Jit Poh* that Malaya was as important as Singapore and that the British should have trained the Overseas Chinese in air defense and dispatched 500 each of bombers

and fighter planes to Singapore and Malaya to gain the upper hand. It was now proven that the air force had indeed been inadequate, affecting badly the battlefield situation and allowing the enemy to win [*claiming foresight and blaming the British*].

This birthday souvenir magazine account then rambles on to invoke the imprimatur of Chiang Kai-shek to absolve Aw of any suspicions of disloyalty and to further promote his ongoing postwar courtship of the Guomindang. It refers to Aw's visit to Chongqing via Myanmar at the beginning of 1941 to attend the wartime assembly of the People's Political Council and his personal meeting with Chiang. Aw told Chiang at the meeting that he needed to rush back soon because the weather was turning cold and he had not brought enough winter clothing. Chiang smilingly replied that he had three sets and would like to present one to Aw as a gift. Aw then used his impending birthday celebrations as another reason why he needed to rush back. Chiang responded that this was good news and since China would certainly be winning the war, he would host a grand birthday party for Aw in Beijing upon achieving victory.

Claims of close relations with China's national leader and his own patriotism toward China filled the pages in the 1947 account. However, in sharp contrast to the November 1943 statement, this account makes no reference to a single grain of rice! Variations in details and emphasis are also glaring when we compare these two narratives with the official and confidential Minutes of the Aw-Tojo Meeting which were buried in the archives for nearly 60 years.

Blast from the Archives: Review of the Minutes of the Aw-Tojo Meeting

The most significant documentary discovery resulting from the recent resurgence of interest in Aw is the confidential minutes of his one meeting with the wartime Prime Minister of Japan Tojo Hideki in Tokyo on 17 July 1943, Saturday, at 2–3.30 pm. It first surfaced as a historical record when it was included in a 1990 Tokyo University Press publication on the Tojo cabinet (Ito Takashi, Hirohashi Tadamitsu and Katashima Norio 1990: 200–204). But Chinese writers have claimed it as a significant discovery made in late July 1992 by Hong Buren 洪 卜 仁 of the Xiamen Municipal Gazette Office. Hong is said to have located this source with the help of a Japanese friend when he went to Japan to take part in an international conference (Lin Tianhua 1992: 8, 18; Ji 1995: 119; Interview with Kong Yongsong 20 July 2004; *Xiamen ribao* 12 Nov. 1992; *Shijie ribao* 17 Nov. 1992). It has since been translated into Chinese by Duan Mei 段 梅 and published in *Jindaishi ziliao* 近代史资料 (*Sources on Contemporary History*). Coming from the Japanese side in the form of a bureaucratic record of the conversation which took place at that point in time, it is relatively untainted by

personal bias and free from memory lapses, rendering it a useful source for comparison with the other discourses which have been discussed. It would not be appropriate to do an *ad verbatim* translation into English here, but certainly worthwhile to provide at least a paraphrased and summary version pertaining to our line of inquiry (Account below as constructed from *Dongtiao Yingji – Hu Wenhu huitan yaozhi* 1994: 112–17).¹⁷ Analytical remarks are again added in italics and placed within parentheses.

After the opening exchange of courtesy, Aw began by pointing out the intractable suffering of the Chinese people on the two sides of Chiang Kai-shek and Wang Jingwei [*claiming charitable intention which had an impact on both Chinese and Japanese interests*]. Tojo responded by saying that people's suffering had been a global problem caused primarily by the expanding War. Viewing the war between Japan and the Anglo-American powers as destructive while that between Japan and the Chinese Chongqing government as a mere quarrel between brothers, Tojo pledged his best effort to help bring about a solution to the problems of people's livelihood.

Referring to Wang Jingwei's over-reliance on Japanese support and his corrupt agencies in Shanghai, Nanjing and Guangzhou, Aw felt that people's livelihood over there was particularly bad and thus he deeply wished to help [*criticizing Wang's collaborationist regime and emphasizing his own charitable intention*]. Tojo answered that he was aware that the Nanjing government was far from perfect but that this was understandable as it was like a three-year-old kid and hence more assistance was necessary to help it develop and improve. Regarding Aw's proposal to rescue the poor, Tojo expressed the wish to go into the main topic of discussion. He had heard about the extreme poverty of the Chinese people and how some had died. Referring to the availability of surplus rice from Myanmar, he requested Aw to play a role in shipping them to inland China, and to secure a barter exchange of war resources needed by Japan, specifically tungsten, cotton, and tung oil. He believed that shipping facilities could be easily arranged, given the ingenuity of Aw [*involving Aw as a close partner in a barter deal to secure precious war resources for Japan, not charity*].

With respect to the Nanyang Overseas Chinese, Tojo reiterated that it was always an imperial policy to secure their help. However, if the Overseas Chinese were to be in enmity with Japan, then they would inevitably be ruthlessly suppressed. Tojo confessed that the prevailing conditions of the Nanyang Overseas Chinese had made him feel like having something stuck between the teeth, making chewing and swallowing rather difficult. His own thinking was that the most important and immediate issues were the recovery of the Chinese people and the positive guidance of the Nanyang Overseas Chinese. Aw responded by saying that the Overseas Chinese were patriotic and had long desired to break free from suppression by Britain and America, and went on to provide some examples of

how he had disliked the Whites [*affirming his leadership role over Overseas Chinese, asserting his own patriotism, and affiliating himself with Japan against the Whites*]. Declaring his own confidence in guiding the Overseas Chinese, he suggested that Japan release all those benign and influential Overseas Chinese who were under arrest and educate them about Japan's genuine intentions so as to make them valuable [*aligning the Overseas Chinese and himself with Japan*]. Aw even went on to give examples of why he had an intense dislike for the white people and said that while he had never knelt to the British governor in Hong Kong, he had given his regards to the Japanese governor because the Chinese and Japanese belonged to the same (yellow) race [*fawning on the Japanese and again plucking a racial line*]. Claiming to have been elected as the representative of 12 million Overseas Chinese just before the outbreak of the Pacific War, Aw said he felt it was extremely necessary for him to rescue the Overseas Chinese.

At this point, Tojo pressed Aw to return to the topic of using surplus Myanmar rice to provide relief to the people [*making it clear again that the rice exchange deal was the central issue of the meeting*]. Believing that shipping problems were secondary, Aw then argued that basic principles had to be considered first. Since it had become clear that China would never be able to win the war against Japan no matter how hard it was to try, he conveyed his wish that Japan would discontinue its attack on Chongqing. If such attacks were continued, the transshipment of surplus rice would still not provide relief for the people. If the situation was moderated, he would try his best to bring about an exchange of resources with the hinterland [*cutting a deal which would lessen military pressure on the Chongqing government and positioning himself as a negotiator between Japan and Chiang's Free China*]. Tojo replied firmly that whether such attacks would continue lay within the purview of the Japanese military high command, but made it clear that if Chongqing were to continue letting the United States use the Chinese bases to bomb Japanese territories and French Indochina, and to perpetrate outrages, then it would be thoroughly destroyed. The key was whether Chiang Kai-shek would show repentance for his past errors and stop the above activities. On the exchange for tungsten and other resources, Tojo emphasized strongly that there was at that moment no intention at all to ask Aw to be a go-between with Chongqing or Chiang Kai-shek, but only to ask Aw to talk to his friends and see if such exchanges would be feasible [*Japan denying the possibility of a formal mediating role for Aw and possibly thinking of the active smuggling networks that criss-crossed China during the war, especially in the border territories between the Chiang and Wang Jingwei regimes*].¹⁸

The discussion then digressed to the topics of Anglo-American and white-man hegemony in East Asia, why Japan had to take action, and whether Chiang Kai-shek understood the situation well and harbored the will to act. At one point, Aw even asked Japan to give Chiang the leeway to move forward as the latter was

by then completely walled in. When Tojo felt anxious enough to press Aw to return to the topic of rice exchange, Aw challenged outright the separation of the two issues, that of Japan seeking a peace settlement with Chongqing and that of providing relief for the Chinese people. To him, the two issues were one and the same [*pressing repeatedly for a mediating role*]. Given that Japan had by then given its full support to the Wang regime, Tojo responded that there was no need to discuss the issue of peace settlement with Aw and there was also no possibility of reaching a conclusion on the matter. Refusing to budge, Aw pointed out that the key to the rice relief plan was to avoid obstacles erected by both the Japanese and Chinese authorities and he would try to negotiate with Chiang's side after his return to Hong Kong to bring that plan to fruition [*still seeking a major mediating role*]. At this point, Tojo adamantly insisted that there was absolutely no intention to ask Aw to conduct negotiations with Chongqing. He made clear that there must be no misunderstanding about this on Aw's part and offered Aw the perk of visiting Japan again if and when Aw fully understood his real intention.

In bringing the meeting to a close, Tojo expressed the hope that the proposal on Myanmar rice would be well-handled. In reply, Aw said that fortunately there were Nanyang Overseas Chinese who knew him well and they could try to use *junks* to ferry rice from Annam and elsewhere to China; he hoped to have the assistance of Japan [*firming up the deal*]. Tojo said the details could be worked out with his staff on military affairs and raised no objections to using *junks* to bring in the rice. But he cautioned that, even in Japan, consultation had first to be made with the navy and army before implementation.

At this point of near departure, Aw abruptly raised the issue of his own house arrest and asked Tojo whether he intended to do something about it in order to facilitate Aw's future activities [*seeking further preferential treatment for himself*]. Tojo said he was unaware of the house arrest but suggested that there must have been some reasons for it to be imposed by the Japanese governor in Hong Kong. Nonetheless, in view of the need to implement the rice proposal, he would be informing Japanese agencies to give Aw greater convenience. Moreover, if Aw needed to meet up with business people in Shanghai (or, as suggested earlier, even to visit Japan again), it could be arranged. The meeting then ended with Tojo encouraging Aw to exert himself on behalf of the Chinese people and with Aw thanking him profusely.

Conclusion

Like the different versions of the truth given by different characters in the 1950 Japanese classic movie *Rashomon*, the discourses on Aw Boon Haw's interactions with the Japanese during the Occupation years, especially his dramatic meeting

with Prime Minister Tojo Hideki in Tokyo, are varied in details and arguments. There are many contradictions and inconsistencies. It is not the intention of this paper to resolve all those differences, nor would it be possible. The writing of history is always a laborious process and there is a limitation on the amount of details of the past which can be resurrected. The task of ascertaining the faithfulness and accuracy is made many times more difficult when some of the accounts have been empowered by memories which are far from perfect and colored by bias, or when they have been deployed through literary license which permits boundary crossings between fiction and reality at will and with relish.

The different discourses revolve around a man who was a son of the Chinese diaspora. He belonged to the first locally-born generation of migrant Chinese and was one of the few who made it from rags to riches. He lived in an era before the break-up of the colonial empires and the establishment of nation-states in Southeast Asia. By the early 1940s, Aw was already rich and famous through hard work, business acumen, marketing skill and flamboyance. Thanks in no small measure to his trans-national and pan-regional strategies in doing business, he rode high on his reputation as the “Tiger Balm King,” “Newspaper King,” and “Great Philanthropist.” Lynn Pan has called him a son of China in her Sino-centric bestseller, *Sons of the Yellow Emperor: The Story of the Overseas Chinese*.¹⁹ However, Aw’s credentials as a true son of China has aroused strong suspicions owing to his activities in Hong Kong during the Japanese Occupation years. He was never officially named and put on trial as a traitor. Suggestions of him being one were circulated for a while but they faded rather quickly.

That issue has come under the spotlight again since the early 1980s. The resurgence of interest can be traced to the change in ideology and policy in China from a Maoist to a Dengist paradigm. At the same time, the emergence of a brood of fast developing “dragon” and “tiger” economies in postwar Asia, nurtured under the wings of Japan, and the visible role played by the Chinese diasporic network of capital and labor provided the impetus for a state-orchestrated campaign to review the man in history. It takes two hands to clap; the acquiescence and funding of Aw’s daughter Sally Aw Sian was crucial, resulting in a reassessment effort on the scale of a duo-generation, family enterprise.

It started off cautiously enough with an emphasis on the need for a holistic approach in biographical assessment and hence the need to bear with Aw’s shortcomings during the War by situating them within the larger context of his other business and philanthropic achievements. The initial formula was to confront a small “mistake” and arrive at the overall conclusion that Aw was a good and noble man. Since this was a historical reassessment, effort was put into the search for empirical evidence. For this search, Marxist scientism and Dengist revisionist emphasis on “seeking truth from facts” provided the ideological basis, while the Rankean-minded writers supplied the energy. Previously neglected

documents were rediscovered and given emphasis. Together, they provided a better and more detailed account and arguably contributed to building a successful case against the use of the label “traitor” to capture what Aw tried to do or achieved, especially during his trip to Tokyo.

However, revisionist writings have apparently gone too far in making use of these documents to reach not only a “not guilty” verdict but actually to confer on Aw the exalted status of being a true patriot. They point to the fact that Aw was not meek and submissive as the business-like meeting in Tokyo was conducted with a great deal of mutual respect and parity. Aw openly registered his disdain for the Wang Jingwei puppet regime and reaffirmed his deep commitment to Chiang Kai-shek’s government in no uncertain terms. There was a battle of wits and tough negotiations and no signs of a puppet show. Aw’s Chinese patriotism was couched in terms of helping to alleviate the suffering of the common people, as well as fighting for the political expressions and economic interests of the Overseas Chinese communities.

Such revisionism has ignored contradicting signals. Aw clearly made the trip to the enemy land in the middle of the war and attended a meeting with the Prime Minister without any visible signs of being coerced. It was also a meeting during which Aw solicited significant personal advantages. He positioned himself to be recognized as the premier wartime leader of the entire Overseas Chinese community, a role which he had coveted even before the War. He also tried his best to secure for himself a firm mediating role between the Japanese government and the Guomindang Chongqing government. While the rice deal was clearly a key item of discussion and framed within the charitable concerns for the suffering of poor and hungry Chinese, the ultimate goal of this venture was to use the exchange of rice to obtain precious war resources such as tungsten to enable Japan to continue the Pacific War and maintain its grip over the occupied territories. Since it is most unlikely that the confidential Minutes of the Aw-Tojo Meeting has been doctored by the scribes, it is also clear that Aw was also fairly liberal in expressing his appreciation of Japan’s imperial aspirations, dislike of the Anglo-American, white-man hegemonic powers, sympathy for the yellow race, and support for the Japanese concept of Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.

These contrary readings have been conveniently disregarded. In the end, caution is thrown to the wind and a new dominant template of interpretation has emerged and swung to the other extreme. Aw is elevated to the status of true patriot of the China-centered Chinese diaspora. The state objective of securing a slice of the global capitalism through the Overseas Chinese network and the momentum of the state-driven initiative have culminated in a simplistic, ahistorical binary template of black versus white which has no room for a middle spectrum of colours. Therefore, Aw’s frequent reference to his distancing of business from politics and his mantra, “I am a businessman ... I don’t like politics,” are mere

tactical positioning rather than statements of truth.²⁰ In life and in death, Aw has proven that there is always an intimate connection between business and politics. It is this entanglement of business and politics which has evidently provided fertile ground for revisionist writings whenever the political wind changes directions. In Aw's case, the roller-coaster ride of revisionism has taken him from the depths of treachery to the heights of patriotism, enabling the egoistic Tiger Aw to have the last laugh ... or thundering roar.

Notes

- ¹ Lynn Pan has attempted to pierce this myth by blatantly equating the ointment with the modern-day Vicks vapor muscle rub with "little more than a mixture of menthol, camphor, clove oil, peppermint oil, cassia oil and cajuput oil, bound together by wax and petroleum" (1990: 176).
- ² Aw couched his new initiative in pan-provincial terms and called for unity among Overseas Chinese. However, the historical Hakka-Hokkien rivalry apparently remained deep and Hokkien leaders generally withheld their support. Some Guomintang agencies also proved to be lukewarm. The scheme was eventually killed by the civil war and hyperinflation. See documents in a folder compiled by the Fujian Provincial Archives, dated 7 Dec. 1992, mostly originating from Files 36/14/4427 and 5376.
- ³ These were reproduced and prominently displayed in the Aw Boon Haw Memorial Hall, exhibition hall 8 which I visited during a fieldtrip to Yongding on 22 July 2004.
- ⁴ This article has been reprinted in *Dongnanya xuebao* 东南亚学报 (*Journal of Southeast Asia*) 1965: 43–45 and again in *Xianggang Chongzheng zonghui tekan* 1966: 8–9.
- ⁵ Reprint available in *Huwenhu yanjiu* 胡文虎研究 (*Aw Boon Haw Studies*) 1 (July 1985). The same newspaper on 9 June 1983 carries an official, detailed, question-and-answer account of the procedural steps taken so far (also reprinted in above). This was issued in the name of the Fujian provincial governor but was said to have been crafted personally by Xiang Nan, see Hu Shaoan 2004: 445.
- ⁶ The foundation has an office in Hong Kong, but the headquarters and focus of activities are on mainland China and the funding is essentially drawn from the returned old properties of the Aw family, see pp. 86–87. Xiang Nan died in November 1997 and was given a state funeral and burial in the prestigious Babaoshan Revolutionary Cemetery 八宝山革命公墓.
- ⁷ Lesser known and much poorer members of the Aw clan visited the ancestral village as part of the rehabilitation process, including Sally Aw's half-brother Aw It Haw 胡一虎 in 1988 and her cousin Aw Cheng Taik 胡清德 in Apr. 1991, see Tu (1992: 51). However, the Aw Sian-centered commemorative volume has ignored them.
- ⁸ This refutes the short reference in Howard Boorman (1967: 179) which claims that "in 1944, Aw was elected chairman of the Hong Kong Chinese Association."
- ⁹ The basis of scholarship on this topic is laid by Kong Yongsong who was a history professor at Xiamen University, and Hong Buren who worked at the Xiamen Municipal Gazette Office, especially through presentations at the September 1992 academic conference to celebrate the 110th anniversary of Aw's birth. Their announced book project on Aw did not materialize but their arguments have been widely reported and incorporated in five books on Hong Kong wartime history written by Xie Yongguang, e.g. Xie (1994: 118–19).

- ¹⁰ This is essentially a condensed and repackaged version of his previous book, containing additional information about himself. More significantly, it has as many as eight prefaces and one foreword, reflecting the overwhelming support for this Singapore Hakka publication effort.
- ¹¹ Zhang's inclusion of Aw's statement contains typographical errors and a brazen attempt to omit a short passage relating to claims of Japan's brotherly love for China.
- ¹² One notable lapse in citation is the absence of reference to Zhang Yonghe's writings in making an argument (p. 33) on the importance of viewing the year 1943 as a turning point in the Pacific War when contextualizing Aw's trip to Tokyo.
- ¹³ Criticisms of Hong Buren and Kong Yongsong's reading of archival documents started with Guan Ning 管宁 (1994: 221–25).
- ¹⁴ This is a reprint of a report first carried in the Shantou newspaper *Yuedong ribao* 粤东日报, 16 Oct. 1943. This item has been highlighted by Chen 1987: 28, and Hong, and Kong (1993: 189).
- ¹⁵ The full text of this statement apparently first appeared in *Heung To Jih Poh* 香岛日报. *Quanmin xinribao*'s reprint on 26 Nov. 1943 has been often wrongly stated as 21, 22 or 28 Nov. in many secondary accounts.
- ¹⁶ The account below is constructed from *Huwenhu xiansheng liuzhi jinwu shouchen zhuankan*, pp. 14–16.
- ¹⁷ This translation from Japanese to Chinese is done by Duan Mei 段梅 and is the second Chinese-language version. A previous translation by Kong Yongsong in Kong (1993: 1–6) was later regarded as inadequate as revealed in my interview with Kong in Xiamen on 20 July 2004. There is apparently no extant English translation and additional information generously offered by one of the anonymous reviewers for *JCO* of this article who has read the original Japanese document has been incorporated.
- ¹⁸ For such wartime dealings, see Eastman (1980).
- ¹⁹ One of the shortcomings of Lynn Pan's book is that the contentious issue of Aw's wartime activities is not mentioned at all despite it being a 1990 publication. For a debate on Pan's China-centered approach, see internet discussion among Anthony Reid, Ng Wing Chung, Madeline Hsu, Shawn McHale and Edward Friedman in H-Asia, thread on "Chinese Diaspora," 17 Oct.–2 Nov. 1996.
- ²⁰ This remark was one of Aw's favorite phrases (King 1992: 328; Chan 1998: 40, 48).

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