Persecution and forced contributions from the Chinese community

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Sook Ching

The occupation fell hardest on the Chinese community of Singapore and Malaya. Because many of them had supported China in its war against Japan through fund-raising and boycotts organised by community leaders, the Japanese military regarded the community as hostile. Three days after the surrender, on 18 February 1942, the Japanese began a purge known in Chinese as Sook Ching, "purge through cleansing". Chinese men between the ages of 18 and 50 were summoned to screening centres. Those whom the military police, the Kempeitai, and their informants identified as anti-Japanese were taken away and shot. At Changi Beach 66 civilians were killed on 20 February 1942, while at Punggol some 300 to 400 civilians were killed on 23 February.[1]

The number of victims has never been established. Japan later claimed that no more than about 6,000 people died. Lee Kuan Yew put the figure at about 70,000, a number that included victims in Malaya. Retrospective estimates by historians range

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from about 25,000 to 50,000 deaths in Singapore itself. An affidavit given after the war by a Japanese officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Hishakari Takafumi, stated that the plan had been to kill 50,000 Chinese.[2] The divergence between these figures has itself become part of the history, because it reflects the long refusal of the Japanese state to investigate the massacres.

The Overseas Chinese Association

Once the killings had ended, the military administration turned to the economic subordination of the community. It established the Syonan Overseas Chinese Association, which held its first meeting at the Goh Loo Club on 2 March 1942. The elderly physician and reformer Lim Boon Keng became its president.[3] The association was presented as the representative of the Chinese community. In practice it transmitted Japanese demands and made the leaders of the community responsible for meeting them.

The leaders who served in the association did so under duress. Many had seen friends and relatives taken away during the screenings, while some had been detained themselves. The Japanese official Mamoru Shinozaki later claimed to have protected Chinese and Eurasian residents by issuing thousands of "Good Citizen" passes, although his role remains disputed.[4] The ambiguity of collaboration under occupation would shape the post-war politics of the Chinese community and the careers of several of its leaders.

The fifty million dollar "gift"

The most direct financial consequence for the community was a demand for a "gift" of $50 million, which the Japanese military administration imposed on the Chinese of Malaya through the Overseas Chinese Association. The original deadline was 20 April 1942. It was extended first to 20 May and then to 25 June. The association organised the collection as a levy on wealth. Dialect groups were assigned to assess each other's assets. Those who owned assets worth more than $3,000 were taxed at 8 per cent.[5]

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The full amount could not be raised in time. On 23 June 1942 eleven Singapore businessmen, led by Lim Boon Keng, signed a document of lien in favour of the Yokohama Specie Bank. According to the National Heritage Board, the Chinese leaders had raised $28 million and were forced to borrow the remainder. The loan carried interest at 6 per cent a year and had to be repaid within one year. On 25 June 1942 Lim Boon Keng presented the sum to General Yamashita.[6]

The transaction combined extortion with the forms of finance, since a Japanese bank lent to the victims the money that they were forced to pay to the Japanese army, at interest and against a lien signed by the leaders of the community. The lien made the leaders personally exposed for a debt that served no purpose of theirs. One of them, the banker Tan Ean Kiam, had stayed in Singapore and was drawn into the association to manage Chinese affairs with the Japanese. He died in March 1943, less than a year after the presentation.[7] For the history of the financial centre, the episode is a reminder that the wealth of a community can be held hostage to the security of its members. The "gift" was a ransom paid by a community whose men had been killed in the preceding weeks.

Property, savings and the wider damage

The forced contribution was only one channel through which the community lost its wealth. Rationing, requisitioning and the monopoly purchase of commodities transferred goods to the Japanese at prices fixed in a depreciating currency. Food imports and exports passed to Japanese companies, while local wholesalers and retailers needed military approval to continue trading. Savings held in banks or in cash lost their value with the currency. Those who held savings in the Japanese-sponsored post office savings bank saw their balances inflated away, while about $3 million was withdrawn from the British Post Office Savings Bank during the occupation.[8]

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The Japanese also moved part of the Chinese population out of the city to grow food. The Overseas Chinese Association helped to resettle Chinese families to Endau in Johor for the New Syonan Model Farm.[9] The schemes gave the authorities a means of relieving the food shortage. For the settlers they meant the loss of urban livelihoods and the exchange of commercial skills for subsistence farming.

Common misconception

The banana note is sometimes described as a currency that was simply printed into hyperinflation from the start. The historical evidence is more nuanced. For the first year the notes circulated at par alongside British currency, while monthly inflation stayed below the strict threshold of hyperinflation until the last weeks of the war. The currency kept a transaction function because the Japanese controlled the markets for food, commodities and labour. What it never acquired was a store-of-value function, which remained with the pre-war currency held in secret and exchanged among people who trusted each other.

Notes

1. Wikipedia, “Japanese occupation of Singapore” (accessed November 2026): the purge began three days after the surrender, on 18 February 1942; Wikipedia, “Sook Ching” (accessed November 2026): Sook Ching ran from 18 February to 4 March 1942, a “systematic purge and massacre” of suspected “anti-Japanese elements”. Wikipedia, “Japanese occupation of Singapore” (accessed November 2026): victims were mainly males aged 18 to 50; Wikipedia, “Sook Ching” (accessed November 2026), on the screening of Chinese males and the role of the Kempeitai. Wikipedia, “Japanese occupation of Singapore” (accessed November 2026): 66 civilians were killed at Changi Beach on 20 February 1942; some 300 to 400 civilians were killed at Punggol on 23 February 1942. ↩
2. Wikipedia, “Sook Ching” (accessed November 2026): Japan alleged “no more than 6,000 deaths”; Lee Kuan Yew stated that verifiable numbers would put it at “about 70,000”, including figures in Malaya; retrospective analysis puts the

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toll "at about 25,000 to 50,000 in Singapore itself". Timothy Pwee, "A War Crimes Trial Snapshot", *BiblioAsia*, vol. 11, issue 4, January–March 2016: the affidavit of Lieutenant-Colonel Hishakari Takafumi "claimed that the plan was to kill 50,000 Chinese". ↩

3. Lee Meiyu and Seow Peck Ngiam, "The Singapore Chinese Community During the Japanese Occupation", *BiblioAsia*, vol. 18, issue 2, July–September 2022: the Syonan-to Overseas Chinese Association was set up in March 1942 under the Japanese military administration; its first meeting was held at the Goh Loo Club on 2 March 1942; "Lim Boon Keng was its president". ↩

4. Wikipedia, "Mamoru Shinozaki" (accessed November 2026): the Overseas Chinese Association was founded on 2 March 1942 as a Japanese-sponsored body; the Welfare Office under Shinozaki issued "thousands of Good Citizen's Ticket[s]"; his role in the Sook Ching and the OCA is contested. ↩

5. Lee Meiyu and Seow Peck Ngiam, "The Singapore Chinese Community During the Japanese Occupation", *BiblioAsia*, July–September 2022: the association became a means for the Japanese authorities to extract $50 million from the Malayan Chinese community as a "donation"; the original deadline of 20 April 1942 was extended to 20 May and then to 25 June. Lee Meiyu and Seow Peck Ngiam, *BiblioAsia*, July–September 2022: dialect groups were assigned to screen each other's assets; "Those who owned assets worth more than $3,000 were taxed 8 percent", while those with assets under $3,000 were exempt. ↩

6. Google Arts & Culture / National Heritage Board, Singapore, "The Overseas Chinese Association, Syonan. To Yokohama Specie Bank, Limited. Document of Lien", 23 June 1942 (Personal Collection of Alex Tan Tiong Hee, Trustee of Settlement of Dr Lim Boon Keng) (accessed November 2026): Lim and other leaders were ordered to raise $50 million; $28 million was raised and the businessmen were forced to borrow the rest; eleven businessmen signed, Lim Boon Keng first. Wikipedia, "Lim Boon Keng" (accessed November 2026): the "donation" was of 50 million Straits dollars, of which "only 28 million dollars were raised with much difficulty", the remainder being lent through the Yokohama Specie Bank. Lee Meiyu and Seow Peck Ngiam, *BiblioAsia*, July–

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September 2022: the shortfall was covered by a loan from the Yokohama Specie Bank "at an interest rate of 6 percent per annum", to be repaid within one year. Bukit Brown Heritage, "27 Tan Ean Kiam 陳延謙" (author Lee Chyen Yee, accessed November 2026): the association raised the $50 million with a loan from the Yokohama Specie Bank, and Lim Boon Keng presented it to General Yamashita on 25 June 1942. ↩

7. Bukit Brown Heritage, "27 Tan Ean Kiam 陳延謙" (accessed November 2026): Tan Ean Kiam was co-opted into the association; "As a banker, he was involved in raising the $50 million ransom demanded by the Japanese"; he died on 30 March 1943. ↩
8. Lee Meiyu and Seow Peck Ngiam, *BiblioAsia*, July–September 2022: Japanese companies took over all food import and export businesses, and local wholesalers and retailers needed Japanese military approval to continue operating. Kratoska, "Banana Money", 1992, note 24 (reference notes consulted on Cambridge Core, November 2026): Dai Nippon Post Office Savings Bank accounts averaged $81 at the end of the occupation; about $3 million was withdrawn from the British Post Office Savings Bank during the occupation. ↩
9. Lee Meiyu and Seow Peck Ngiam, *BiblioAsia*, July–September 2022: the association helped resettle Chinese to Endau in Johor for the New Syonan Model Farm and encouraged land clearing and food planting. ↩

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