Anti-Japanese activities in North Borneo before World War Two, 1937-1941

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Anti-Japanese activities in North Borneo before the Pacific War were part of a larger anti-Japanese campaign waged by the Chinese in Southeast Asia. In North Borneo one of the most important outcomes was politicisation of the Chinese community. During this period the North Borneo Company, which had previously welcomed Japanese capital and labour, also began to take steps to curb Japanese activities in the state.

The present study is an investigation of anti-Japanese activities in North Borneo (present-day Sabah, East Malaysia) in the years leading up to World War Two. While it is undeniable that Chinese residents of the territory played a crucial role in this effort, this essay discusses the anti-Japanese activities pursued by an increasingly hostile colonial government, namely the British North Borneo Company, as well as those carried out on a more individual basis. Anti-Japanese activity in North Borneo during the 1930s did not become the sort of grand crusade seen in Singapore or Malaya, but the situation had several distinctive features that make it worth examining. In the Malay Peninsula, Chinese organisations, including the Kuomintang and the Communist Party, spearheaded anti-Japanese activities. In North Borneo, anti-Japanese activities were part of a Southeast Asia-wide Nanyang Chinese National Salvation Movement led by Singapore entrepreneur Tan Kah Kee. However, there were local variations in the case of North Borneo.

North Borneo was part of the Brunei and Sulu Sultanates until 1878, when the founders of what would become the North Borneo Company established Western rule in the territory. The Company itself controlled the state from 1881 to 1942, and many local institutions dated from this period. The Japanese Army occupied North Borneo from January 1942 to August 1945, and after the war the territory was under British Military Administration from September 1945 until July 1946, when it became a crown colony.

The Sino-Japanese conflict and anti-Japanese activities in North Borneo

The winds of war touched North Borneo as early as September 1931, following the Mukden Incident when the Japanese Army entered Manchuria and set up the puppet government of Manchukuo. Japan's aggression against China prompted a concerted effort by the Chinese in Southeast Asia to raise funds in aid of the KMT government's military effort. In North Borneo the Chinese community set up a China Relief Fund, and by July 1937, when the next phase of the