



Analyzing the Sphere of Influence of the Japanese Empire in the Muslim Region of Northern China within the Context of Eurasia (1937-1945): A Constructivist Perspective

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ABSTRACT

During the period of 1937-1945, as Japan embarked on its military expansion in Asia, the Muslim-populated regions in northern China held strategic importance. Japan recognized the need for an "Islamic policy" and implemented various "Islamic campaigns" to consolidate its presence in these areas. These campaigns were driven by the objective of establishing a sphere of influence encompassing northern China and extending towards Central Asia within the larger context of Eurasia. By aligning its policies with those of its allies and leveraging soft control, Japan aimed to counteract rival powers and ensure its dominance in the region. To fully understand these Japanese activities and their implications, this research employs a descriptive-analytical approach, utilizing historical sources and firsthand information. By adopting a constructivist perspective, this study aims to shed light on the motives, strategies, and consequences of Japan's efforts to create and sustain its sphere of influence in the Muslim region of northern China, thereby contributing to our understanding of the significance of this historical period in the broader Eurasian context.

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Introduction

Japan's aggressive imperial aspirations in the Asian theater precipitated the onset of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, which persisted through World War II (1939-1945). Within the discussions among Japanese officials regarding the country's expansionist strategies, particularly emphasizing the Doctrine of Expansion into Northern Asia¹ or the Doctrine of Expansion into Southern Asia², the pivotal role of Muslims and their substantial presence became a focal point in both approaches to extending Japan's influence. Consequently, Japan contemplated forging an alliance with the Islamic world through the formulation of an Islamic Policy³ as an integral component of its broader Asian policy (Shimada, 2015: 64). This was deemed as necessary in order to secure Japan's desired sphere of influence in Eurasia and effectively exploit the region's resources and geopolitical advantages.

This research is dedicated to examining the implementation of Japan's Islamic policy, which played a pivotal role in its pursuit of territorial expansion during World War II. Initially, under the Doctrine of Expansion into Northern Asia, Japan aimed to establish a Sphere of Influence⁴ in the Muslim-populated regions of northern China, extending it towards Central Asia. However, for reasons that remain the subject of inquiry, Japan later shifted its focus to the nations in the Asia-Pacific region, with a particular emphasis on the Dutch Indies (Indonesia) under the Doctrine of Expansion into Southern Asia. This study will analyze the creation and sustenance of Japan's envisioned territorial sphere, known as the Greater East Asia⁵, with a specific focus on the Muslim-populated region of North China. It will also explore the conducive conditions provided and cultural and educational campaigns orchestrated to facilitate Japan's objectives.

The Japanese sought to rectify the errors of Kaiser Wilhelm II's (1859-1941) ambitious plan, the 'Drive to the East⁶,' by modeling it and creating a Greater East Asia, aiming to garner support from Sino-Muslims (Hammond, 2017: 259). Operating as one of the Axis powers, Japan, while collaborating with its allies, gleaned insights from the policies and management experiences of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy in their respective areas of influence among Muslims in the Near East, Middle East, and North Africa. Consequently, this research delves into examining the strategies employed by Japan to establish and sustain its sphere of influence at both international and state levels.

Japanese initiatives to forge closer ties with Muslims and cultivate peaceful relationships through emotional connections, avoiding the use of force, alongside the construction of narratives emphasizing historical, linguistic, and religious commonalities to present a unified identity against rivals at the state level, are pivotal aspects explored in this research. Additionally, the study scrutinizes Japan's allies' experiences at the international level.

The significance of this research further lies in its potential relevance to contemporary circumstances. Despite the brief presence of the Axis powers in Islamic territories and the disappearance of Fascist ideology, the ideas instilled in Muslim revolutionary activists who assumed power in some post-war independent countries formed the bedrock of anti-communist, anti-imperialist, and particularly anti-Zionist ideologies within Arab nationalist movements. The imperative of investigating Japan's role as a world power in influencing the political activities of Islamic groups in 20th-century Asia becomes apparent, as it may have played a role in the emergence of political Islam, including its militant manifestation in certain regions globally. Overlooking this historical factor may hinder a comprehensive analysis of militant Islam (Esenbel, 2004: 1154).

While some view the September 11, 2001 attack by Al-Qaeda as a consequence of America's efforts to establish close relations with Islamic currents under the Green Belt strategy against communism, the historical context reveals that promoting Islam as a bulwark against communism in Central and Northeast Asia was, in fact, a pre-war Japanese counterpart to the CIA's later strategy during the Cold War (Esenbel, 2004: 1154-1155).

The primary objective of this research is to investigate Japan's cultural and educational mechanisms,

1. Hokushin-ron / 北進論

2. Nanshin-ron / 南進論

3. Kaikyō Seisaku / 回教政策

4. Seiryoku-ken / 勢力圏

5. Daitōa / 大東亜

6. Drang nach Osten

its strategic maneuvers to establish dominance and counteract the influence of other parties in the Greater East Asia region. The adoption of a specialized Islamic policy was imperative for Japan's penetration into the Muslim area, a target of the Japanese Imperial Army's expansionism. Particularly in the northern region of China, inhabited predominantly by Hui Sino-Muslims, Japan implemented this policy through a series of Islamic campaigns¹. The main question is what was the purpose of the Japanese by launching these campaigns? In this regard, this question can also be asked, how could the maneuvers and campaigns implemented by the Japanese army in the North China region help achieve the desired goals?

In response to the main question, the hypothesis posits that the Japanese army, through the planning and execution of Islamic campaigns against Hui Muslims, aimed to preclude the influence of other parties in the region while establishing dominance. The Hui Chinese, primarily residing in Northwest China, particularly in the provinces of Ningxia, Gansu, and Qinghai, are a predominantly Muslim ethnic group (numbering to be somewhere between 10 to 20 million) known for their distinct cultural practices and traditions. Another query suggests that Japan's campaigns, manifested through cultural and educational activities, sought to foster a sense of affinity between the Japanese and Hui Muslims by emphasizing historical, religious, and cultural commonalities. This, in turn, aimed to construct a shared identity, simultaneously creating a divergence from rivals and compelling Hui Muslims to comply without resorting to coercive measures.

The research methodology involves the identification of patterns and connections by analyzing historical data. Descriptive analysis techniques are employed for data aggregation, and information sourced from historical Japanese and English texts is systematically organized to discern patterns and significance. The comprehensive nature of the research relies on extracting data from a range of historical sources to ensure a thorough examination.

1. Literature Review

Examining Japan's interactions with Muslims from pre-World War I to World War II yields four noteworthy works. The initial trio predominantly explores Japan's international engagement with Muslims and an ideological alignment counter to Western civilization. The concluding work, operating at the state level, delineates the Japanese Imperial Army's pursuits based on meticulously gathered historical data.

In his 2017 article, Kelly A. Hammond delves into Japan's emulation of Axis powers during World War II, leveraging relations for expansionism and influence in the Islamic world. Hammond accentuates Japan's strategic assimilation of Germany and Italy's experiences in managing Muslim affairs across the Middle East and North Africa to legitimize its presence, notably in China and Indonesia.

Several Turkish researchers, in their respective works, scrutinize anti-Western sentiments in the late 19th and 20th centuries within the Ottoman Empire and Japan. They focus on shared intellectual currents in anti-imperialist and non-Western movements.

Selçuk Esenbel and Chiharu Inaba's seminal 2003 work explores the historical relations between the Empire of Japan and the Ottoman Empire. It comprehensively delves into diplomatic, cultural, and economic dimensions within the broader context of modernization, national identity quests, and a dynamic international landscape. Their collaborative effort spans generations, marked by a convergence of liberal ideologies, anti-Western sentiments, imperialistic aspirations, and reformist endeavors.

Cemil Aydin's 2007 work on Japanese Pan-Asianism and Muslim Pan-Islamism meanwhile articulates a compelling argument about the political activism shared by Japan and the Ottoman Empire. Aydin contends that both entities, motivated by a common desire to challenge Western hegemonic modernity and contest Western civilization's purported superiority, aspired to forge a novel world order rooted in moral and authentic principles informed by Pan-Asian and Pan-Islamic perspectives.

Atsuko Shinbo's 2018 Japanese-language book scrutinizes the Japanese Empire's policies toward ethnic minorities, particularly Muslims in northern China, and women's education. It centers on the Japanese military invasion of China, Islamic campaigns, and the employment and education of Hui Muslims through the All China Muslim League². The book provides detailed insights into the Japanese

1. Kaikyō kōsaku / 回教工作

2. Chūgoku kaikyō sōrengōkai / 中国回教総聯合会

Imperial Army's activities and policies in creating ethnic divisions to contain the dominant Han ethnic group, focusing on areas like North China and Mengjiang that have received limited attention.

While Hammond and Turkish researchers address Japan's macro-level efforts in Asian territories and the commonalities of Pan-Asian and Pan-Islamist ideologies, they lack a coherent political analysis within a theoretical framework. This academic article contributes to the existing literature by examining Japan's interactions with Muslims from pre-World War I to World War II, specifically focusing on its presence in China as a sphere of influence. It fills a gap by providing a coherent political analysis within a theoretical framework, shedding light on Japan's strategic assimilation of Axis powers' experiences in managing Muslim affairs and its emulation of anti-Western sentiments in the pursuit of expansionism and influence in the Islamic world. The article expands our knowledge by exploring the ideological alignment counter to Western civilization and the shared intellectual currents in anti-imperialist and non-Western movements between the Ottoman Empire and Japan.

2. Theoretical Framework

In response to the escalating expansionism of the Japanese Imperial Army, the Islamic policy of Japan became increasingly directed towards Greater East Asia, with a specific focus on the Muslim areas of North China (Shimada, 2015: 78). Consequently, an exploration of the concept of the sphere of influence is deemed essential to comprehend the nature of the campaigns and measures implemented by the Japanese Imperial Army in pursuit of its objectives vis-à-vis the Muslim population in this region. The constructivist approach emerges as a suitable analytical framework for elucidating the intricacies of the sphere of influence in this context.

2.1 Sphere of Influence

The term "sphere of influence" holds historical roots in colonial literature, evoking associations with empires and, for some, the Cold War era (Hast 2016: 10). Despite its prevalence in international politics, this concept has been somewhat overlooked in terms of in-depth analysis. Exploring key definitions can shed light on its nuanced understanding.

Kaufman defines a sphere of influence as "a geographic region characterized by the high penetration of one superpower to the exclusion of other powers and particularly of the rival superpower" (Kaufman, 1976: 11). Keal, in his definition, characterizes a sphere of influence as "a determinate region within which a single external power exerts a predominant influence, which limits the independence or freedom of action of political entities within it" (Keal, 1983:15).

A nuanced distinction exists in Kaufman's and Keil's definitions. Kaufman emphasizes the relations of superior powers, involving infiltrating a region with the aim of excluding other powers. Conversely, Keil examines the relationship between the influential state and the under-influenced state(s), scrutinizing the limitation of sovereignty. These definitions underscore the importance of exclusion and preventing the influence of other powers, coupled with the restriction of the independence of the state(s) under influence (*control*) (Hast, 2016: 6).

Etzioni's definition provides an additional perspective, rejecting control through force and economy in favor of ideation. He characterizes spheres of influence as "international formations that contain one nation (the influencer) that commands superior power over others." For this formation to qualify as a sphere of influence, the influencer's level of control over the subject nations must be intermediate—lower than that of an occupying or colonizing nation but higher than that of a coalition leader. Crucially, the means of control employed must be largely ideational and economic, eschewing coercive measures (Etzioni 2015: 117).

These definitions collectively portray the sphere of influence as a hierarchical structure, safeguarded and created through the exercise of *control* over a specific region or political organization by an external actor, particularly in its relations with third parties. It involves the *exclusion* and prevention of other external actors from exerting a similar type of control and domination over that particular region (Jackson, 2019: 1).

In the case at hand, the Imperial Japanese Army assumes the role of the main actor, wielding *control* and domination over a defined geographical area encompassing North China and regions along Central Asia. This sphere includes social groups and political organizations such as the Hui Sino-Muslims, the Provisional Government of the Republic of China, and the All-China Muslim League as subordinate

actors. The *exclusionary* tactics employed by Japan aim to thwart the intervention of foreign actors, such as the Nationalist government, the Chinese Communist Party, and occasionally, the Soviet Union, functioning as third parties. The analytical assumptions of constructivism will be employed to unravel the logic, mechanisms, and consequences of these dynamics (Jackson, 2019: 1).

2.2 Constructivist Approach

The conclusion of World War II and the subsequent inadequacy of neorealists and neoliberals in comprehending and predicting it marked a conceptual and explanatory failure in their frameworks. Alexander Wendt, a prominent constructivist theorist, formerly subscribed to a neo-realist perspective on social relations and international affairs. His pivotal article, "Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," delves into the social construction of anarchy in state perceptions.

Wendt's constructivist interpretations deviate notably from other theoretical approaches, adopting a sociological understanding of ontology that departs from rationalist traditions. Fundamental to these assumptions is the social nature of international politics. States, comprising individuals within them, are fundamentally social actors, and the meanings ascribed to material conditions hinge on the intersubjective understandings they share or oppose. Constructivism, in essence, seeks to resolve the issue of interests by attributing them to group norms and identities. If a state's interests are shaped through shared perceptions rather than material reality, external assumptions regarding these interests are rendered unnecessary. The content of interests becomes contingent on the identity of the actors and the norms embraced by them. Consequently, the focus shifts from material properties to the constructed properties of a subject actor (Wendt, 1999: 1).

In the constructivist identity-based understanding of international relations, *control* and *exclusion* are reconceptualized as the two primary components of the sphere of influence. When a territory is socially constructed to embody *control* and *exclusion* through normative constructions, attention is directed towards the content of identity—whether national or ethnic narratives, value systems, or cultural customs—and corresponding shared ideas to elucidate and recognize it.

Whether dealing exclusively with states or incorporating social groups as pivotal actors, the construction of spheres of influence is accomplished through socialization. This process engenders the transfer of identity characteristics and the cultivation of in-group solidarity between the main state and other states (or social groups). This solidarity entails a degree of non-compulsory obedience to the main state. *Exclusion* materializes along identity boundaries, and *control* is comprehended and explicated in the form of feelings and emotions, common symbols, or accepted narratives that reinforce such identities. Both components are generated and sustained through exchange and interaction (Jackson, 2019: 8).

According to the constructivist approach to the sphere of influence, in the relationship between the main actor and subordinate actor(s), the most similarities arise in the identity convergence reminiscent of Gramscian hegemony. Its genesis lies in in-group solidarity and the mechanism of influence through narratives in the form of socialization. The logic of connections and alliances is shaped through dependence and common relationships, as well as the feeling of connection and closeness derived from a specific place. Ultimately, the logic of contestation and conflict is determined by the compatibility of discourses (Jackson, 2019: 5).

Additionally, it is imperative to define some commonly used concepts in this section:

A. Islamic Policy: Aligned with the development and unification between Japan and the Islamic world, Japanese policymakers advocated for a specialized foreign policy towards Islam and Muslims that would serve the Japanese Empire. Initially conducted unofficially, this policy evolved into a tool wielded by the military as expansionist policies took precedence. In pursuit of establishing close political and economic relations with Asian Muslims for the benefit of Japan's dominion over the continent, this policy was modeled on the Islamic strategies of Germany, Italy, and Britain as tools for empire building (Esenbel, 2007: 53 and 59).

B. Hui Muslims: The Hui ethnonym denotes a tribe of Chinese-speaking Muslims primarily residing in the strategic areas of northern China (Huabei and Yunnan). They are descendants of Iranian and Arab merchants and the result of intermarriage with the women of Han ethnic group. The Hui communities

significantly differ from the Chinese Han in terms of religion, lifestyle, and linguistics compared to other Chinese Muslim minorities such as the Uyghurs (Hammond, 2017: 252 and Zhang, 2019: 49).

C. Islamic Campaigns: Systematic special activities primarily organized in the form of political and cultural programs to appease the Hui Muslims, presented as a series of campaigns (Islamic Campaigns / Hui Muslim Campaigns¹) (Unno, 2020: 105).

3. Islamic Policy and Islamic Campaigns of Japan against Muslims

In examining the activities and campaigns undertaken by Japan to establish and sustain a sphere of influence in the Muslim regions of North China, a constructivist approach proves apt for analyzing the mechanisms of *control* and *exclusion*, regarded as the two principal components of this territory. Employing a descriptive-analytical method, this section delves into the efforts of the Japanese Empire, particularly during the period of 1937-1945, to delineate its desired territory on both macro and micro levels. The investigation spans the broader scope of Greater East Asia and narrows down to the specific Muslim region of North China.

At the macro level, this research scrutinizes Japan's plans and actions as one of the Axis powers operating in the international and ideological domains. Drawing insights from the policies and managerial practices of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy in their spheres of influence among Muslims in the Near East, Middle East, and North Africa, Japan aimed to assimilate these experiences into its own strategies. Departing from a nationalist standpoint and embracing Pan-Asianism, Japan sought to transcend its focus on Pan-Islamism. This ideological shift aimed to align with and contribute to the overarching ideology of Pan-Asianism.

Japan's efforts extended to utilizing the resources and logistical support provided by the Axis powers. Activities such as the Hajj pilgrimage were employed to establish communication between Muslim networks in the Asian continent, particularly China, and other parts of the Islamic world. This macro-level analysis sheds light on Japan's endeavors to forge international and ideological connections within the context of Axis powers and beyond.

Simultaneously, at the micro level, the policies and campaigns enacted by the Japanese government after 1937 in the establishment and maintenance of its territory in North China require elucidation. This involves a detailed examination of Japan's specific actions and strategic maneuvers in the Muslim regions of North China, shedding light on the intricate dynamics of control and exclusion at the local level.

In essence, the multifaceted approach undertaken in this research encompasses a nuanced analysis of Japan's initiatives both within the broader context of international geopolitics and at the localized level in North China, offering a comprehensive understanding of the constructivist underpinnings influencing the Japanese Empire's engagement with Muslim territories.

3.1 International and Transnational Level: Patterning the Axis and Ideological Alignment with Muslims

The trajectory of Japan's modernization, marked by the establishment of the Meiji (1868-1912) modern state and its subsequent strides in industrial and military prowess, culminated in a strategic alignment with great Western powers and a concerted effort to dismantle unequal treaties and tariffs imposed by the West. Within this context, the Japanese Imperial Army emerged with ambitious aspirations, and during this period of rapid modernization, Islam and Muslims assumed particular significance owing to their ideological importance and geopolitical position in Asia.

The relations between the Japanese Empire and the Islamic world unfolded and underwent transformation across two distinct stages from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century. In the initial phase, during the Meiji period, a shared commitment to Pan-Asian and Pan-Islamist ideologies united Japan and the Islamic world in opposition to the encroachment of Western civilization. The dissatisfaction of the first generation of Westernized Japanese intellectuals with the implementation of Western reform programs, coupled with Western interventions in Muslim colonies and the undercurrents of Islamic unity, underscored the need for Asian and Islamic solidarity. This led to a commitment to self-reliant reforms (Aydin, 2007: 37-41). Notably, during this period, Islam transcended its role as a mere political tool, particularly among Japanese civilian intellectuals (Krämer, 2014: 734).

1. Kaimin kōsaku / 回民工作

Given that multi-ethnic Muslim regions with a population of approximately 100 million in Eurasia and Africa were under Western colonial rule, Japan, not yet recognized diplomatically at the level of European powers, engaged with Muslims through transnational contacts, clandestine activities, and informal meetings between Japanese military and state officials and agents of Japanese Muslim converts. The aftermath of the communist revolution in 1917 marked the commencement of the second stage of Japan's relations with the Islamic world. During this phase, Japan systematically revitalized past relations and sought to implement Islamic policies in political and military dimensions (Esenbel, 2004: 1146-1154), leveraging its alliances to achieve strategic objectives.

Japanese military figures strategically portrayed Japan as a potent force advocating for the liberation of Muslims from Western imperialism and communism across Asia. This narrative served as a rhetorical tool to legitimize Japan's communication with the Axis powers and facilitated interaction between Muslims globally. The collaboration with the Axis powers enabled Japan to expand its influence in occupied areas, including China, Southeast Asia, and the broader Islamic world. Japanese military efforts aimed to provoke anti-colonial and anti-communist sentiments among Muslims in Central Asia and the Indian Ocean, employing transnational networks to further the expansionist goals of the Japanese Empire (Hammond, 2017: 251 and 253).

Despite divergent goals, the Axis powers, including Japan, employed similar tactics against Muslims. Opposition to American and British imperialism and anti-Soviet agitation to undermine Allied claims in Muslim regions of Eurasia and North Africa were common strategies (Hammond, 2017: 253). Nevertheless, occasional conflicts of interest arose, even among Axis powers like Germany and Japan. In the 1930s, both nations resorted to fabricating pre-Islamic connections with Afghanistan to establish diplomatic relations and pursue economic interests. Associating themselves with Afghanistan through Buddhism by the Japanese and forging imaginary links with Afghanistan by narrating a mythical Aryan past by the Germans are among these (Hammond, 2020: 29-30). From a constructivist perspective, these endeavors aimed to exert soft control by presenting ancient and secure connections with Muslim regions.

Additionally, due to Japan's constraints on establishing official relations, the Hajj pilgrimages undertaken between 1938 and 1909, with financial backing from influential economic entities such as the Mitsui, Mitsubishi, and Sumitomo cartels (*zaibatsu*), ostensibly presented religious motives but functioned as a surrogate for official international relations between Japan and the Islamic world. The primary objectives were to cultivate alliances among Muslims, establish favorable connections with Muslim populations in Asian countries to further Japan's Asianist policies in the 1930s, and facilitate the entry of Japanese businesses into the Middle East (Esenbel, 2007: 54 and 57). Despite the convergence of Japanese Pan-Asianism and political Islam in their shared criticism of Western colonialism, Japan pragmatically employed Islam to advance its own interests in alignment with Western powers, leveraging cultural and intelligence-gathering knowledge (Esenbel, 2004: 1168-1169). The Meiji-era Hajj pilgrimage activities aimed to foster a bond between Japanese Pan-Asianism and Pan-Islamism, contributing to the awakening of Islamic nationalism. Subsequently, during the Shōwa era (1926-1989), this foundation of friendship served as a backdrop for transitioning from ideal nationalism to internationalism. In the Shōwa period, these emotional ties and friendships, having a normative dimension in constructivist terms, took on an operational dimension by instrumentalizing Islam and Muslims.

3.2 State Level: The Greater Japan Islamic League¹ as a Policymaker

Distinguishing between Japan's unofficial occupation-related Islamic policies executed through the Army's agents and collaborators, and the official dimension managed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs via the Greater Japan Islamic League (GJIL) and the All China Muslim League (ACML), primarily implementing Imperial Army policies, is crucial. In China, ideological campaigns were initially proposed by Muslim convert activists and intellectuals, and then, political activists took action in a scattered manner. Subsequently, official campaigns were initiated during the occupations with the involvement of official centers.

The formulation of an Islamic policy necessitated a robust political institution. To avoid alarming Western colonial powers, whose Asian Muslim colonies were the target of this policy, this institution

1. Dai Nippon kaikyō kyōkai / 大日本回教協会

operated under the guise of private organizations. The GJIL, akin to counterparts in Germany and Italy, was established in September 1938. It recruited academics, researchers, and translated works from Arabic and Persian to enhance understanding of Muslims, advising military officials and policymakers (Hammond, 2017: 253). The League, created by the Japanese government, aimed to promote Islamic studies, introduce Japanese culture to the Islamic world, foster mutual trade relations, cultural exchange, and political research (Esenbel, 2004: 1164). Japan's increased investment in Middle Eastern markets in the 1930s also contributed to the growing interest in Islam. Initially, the Greater Japan Islamic League was established to promote trade with Japan, and many founders were Japanese businessmen (Shimada, 2015: 68-69). To avoid arousing suspicion and violating the constitution, the League operated under the guise of a private organization, funded by government subsidies and mainly the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Shimada, 2015: 73). Despite successive heads being military generals, the League had a weak relationship with the army (Shimada, 2015: 73-74). It implemented the Islamic policy until the end of World War II, enjoying support from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Army (Esenbel, 2004: 1164).

Prominent military figures, along with right-wing entities such as the Black Dragon Society¹, played a pivotal role in endorsing the establishment of the Islamic League (Shinbo, 1998: 17). Contrarily, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs assumed the role of the principal conduit for all business instructions and administrative communications pertaining to the Islamic League, serving as its official competent authority. Paradoxically, despite being helmed by successive military generals, the Islamic League exhibited a relatively feeble association with the Japanese army (Shimada, 2015: 73-74).

Operational activities of the Islamic League encompassed the publication of the monthly "Islamic World²," the organization of Islamic exhibitions, and the dissemination of pamphlets aimed at guiding intellectual pursuits on Islam. The strategic vision of the Islamic League extended to the unification of the Japanese Empire with the Islamic world, predominantly through the establishment of anti-communist alliances in the Muslim regions of Central and South Asia (Omoso, 2004: 119). It is crucial to underscore a pivotal aspect constraining the primary discourse of this study, which delves into the distinctive Islamic initiatives and campaigns undertaken by the Japanese Imperial Army in North China, specifically geared toward the creation and perpetuation of a sphere of influence in the region. This constraint revolves around the discernible disparities in the specific Islamic policies adopted by the Japanese army.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs had a distinct Islamic policy compared to the Imperial Army. While the Army targeted Muslims in the Far East, the Ministry focused on the Middle East with an emphasis on cultural work. The GJIL, affiliated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, aimed at the entire Islamic world, centered on the Middle East. This divergence persisted until 1943 when the Ministry of Greater East Asia emerged as a strong supporter of the Islamic League (Shimada, 2015: 79).

3.2.1 Islamic Policy and Islamic Campaigns of the Japanese Imperial Army in North China

Islamic campaigns during the period before and after the occupation of China (1937) by Japan can be categorized into unofficial and official parts. The unofficial part comprises scattered personal activities of continental adventurers³.

A. Unofficial Islamic Campaigns

For many Pan-Asian Japanese, initial encounters with Islam and the Islamic world occurred through interactions with Chinese Muslims. Yamaoka Kōtarō [Omar] (1880–1959), the first Japanese *Hajji*, was motivated to study Islam primarily to understand Manchurian Muslims. The intellectual and ideological attention towards Islam and Chinese Muslims in the 1910s laid the foundation for practical Islamic campaigns by Japanese activists aiming to attract the Muslims of China.

Tanaka Ippei [Hajji Nur Muhammad] (1882-1934), the second Japanese *Hajji*, found compatibility between Islamic and Confucian values through the works of Hui Muslim Confucians. Attempting to identify a spiritual commonality among all Asians, he viewed this compatibility as a model for

1 Kokuryū-kai / 黒竜会

2 Kaikyō sekai / 回教世界

3. Tairiku rōnin / 大陸浪人

eclecticism between Islam and ancient Shinto¹ (Ando, 2003: 23-24 and Krämer, 2014: 623-623). Ahmad Ariga Bunhachiro (1868-1946) established a connection between pure Shinto and Islam by recognizing similarities between Shinto's belief in God the Creator and the concept of Allah in Islam (Rezrazi, 1997: 110). These endeavors can be interpreted as attempts to identify similarities between Islam and Shintoism, aiming to create kinship, ideological, and religious commonalities for a shared identity from a constructivist standpoint.

Japan's objective was to unify Asian countries through Pan-Asianism and establish economic relations with Islamic states in Central Asia or the Near East by aligning with Islam, starting with the Muslims of China. This goal was achieved through the ethno-racial genealogy of Chinese Muslims, emphasizing their dissatisfaction with Chinese anti-foreign nationalism. The Japanese differentiated Chinese Muslims from the dominant Han ethnicity, traced the descent of Turko-Muslims in China's Turkistan, and engaged in scientific endeavors to establish the Ural-Altai roots, demonstrating ancestral connections with China. This effort aimed to showcase Japan's co-destiny with Inner Asia and the Islamic world through Chinese Muslims and create a historical bond within an ideological framework. The hypothesis of a common Altaic language origin sought to establish a special historical bond between the Japanese and the people of North Asia, serving as a foundation for creating cross-border identity discourses and convergence with the region's inhabitants. From a constructivist perspective, this effort also aimed at identity demarcation, excluding and distancing other political entities (Chinese nationalists and communists) and the Soviet Union from Japan's intended sphere of influence.

B. Official Islamic Campaigns

With the establishment of the Manchukuo puppet state (1932-1945) in Manchuria, Islamic campaigns related to Hui Muslims assumed a systematic form through official organizations and institutions, marking the commencement of official operations. Hui Muslims held strategic importance as a group connecting Japan, North China, and Inner Asia. Starting from the mid-1930s, all activities concerning Muslims fell under the supervision of the Special Service Agencies of the Japanese Imperial Army (Ando, 2003: 28-29).

A pivotal moment in Islamic policy occurred with the initiation of Japan's war with China in 1937. The occupation of Muslim-populated areas made the organization and control of Muslims a tangible political objective. The Islamic policy became a crucial element in envisioning an Asian order that sought to eliminate Han Chinese as an obstacle to Japan's objectives (Shimada, 2015: 68-69).

Following the Manchurian Incident in 1931 which eventuated to the creation of the Manchukuo state, the Japanese army commenced the process of dividing and conquering North China. The residents of Gansu and Ningxia regions, known as Hui Muslims, descended from Persian and Turkish Muslim merchants and immigrants, and some scholars have also highlighted their potential Arabic origins (Shinbo, 1998: 15; Hammond, 2017: 252). As Japan aimed to create a military state in Inner Mongolia, its governance extended from northwest China to Xinjiang, encompassing the Turkic-speaking Uyghur population in Central Asia.

The Japanese army adopted the Divide and Rule policy in China to control and restrain the Han Chinese. Another goal was to counter the influence of the Soviet Union in the Xinjiang region by establishing an independent state in northwest China. The Islamic policy of the Japanese army took the form of Islamic campaigns with the objective of militarily invading northwest China. These campaigns were executed by the All China Muslim League, a subsidiary body of the Japanese army. Expressing opposition to communism, this union attracted Islamic leaders and influencers, engaging in appeasement and reconciliation activities in religious, educational, and cultural fields (Shinbo, 2018: 80 and Unno, 2020: 107).

In response to Japan's Islamic campaigns in China, nationalists and the Communist Party also adopted an Islamic policy. The Chinese Nationalist state, which had hitherto pursued assimilation policies towards ethnic minorities based on the Great Han Principle, paid attention to the Muslims in the northwestern region of China. The communists in this region also respected the autonomy of ethnic minorities and treated the Hui people well. However, the Muslim League sought to thwart the realization

1. Koshindō / 古神道

of the Islamic policy of Chinese nationalists and communists towards the Muslims in this region (Unno, 2020: 106-107).

The Muslim League, established as a joint headquarters of pseudo-Islamic associations in late 1937 in the Huabei region of China, appointed the imam of the largest mosque in Beijing as its head and the leader of Muslim Hui in Manchukuo as its chief adviser. By 1943, it had seven regional headquarters, one liaison office, two joint branches, and more than 500 separate branches. In fact, the Muslim residents were controlled through their traditional neighborhoods (Ando, 2003: 29-30). The Muslim communities around neighborhood mosques functioned as their local branches. The Muslim League endeavored to depict a geopolitical-cultural relationship between the Muslims of China, the Islamic world, and Japan through cultural activities such as sending delegations to the Hajj pilgrimage, organizing cultural events to evoke anti-Western sentiments, and inviting Hui leaders and youth to Japan.

The Muslim League, primarily active in northern China, undertook various projects to promote Islam. This included managing clerical schools for training *Ahons* (i.e. clergymen), providing religious education in elementary schools, establishing Islamic libraries, and promoting anti-communist religious ideals. The League engaged in educational and cultural activities such as recruiting qualified teachers, managing and supporting elementary and middle schools, training schools in the Japanese language, sending international students to Japan, and publishing magazines and other publications (Shinbo, 1998: 21).

Among its initiatives were economic activities like job placement, employment, research about the Quran, the history of Islam in China, and the real-life conditions of Muslims (Shinbo, 1998: 21). Additionally, the League established a school for Hui girls in Beijing, designed as a girls' conservatory focused on teaching homemaking arts, with the goal of cultivating "good wives and wise mothers¹" in the Japanese style; however, it was not necessarily in accordance with Muslims' needs (Zhang, 2019: 51). The China Muslim Youth League² was responsible for the educational content, activities, and future careers of young people, emphasizing military training to create a Muslim army. These projects fell within the framework of the Islamic campaign and were under the supervision of the Special Service Agencies of the Japanese army (Shinbo, 2018: 151).

However, some of these campaigns, intended to positively discriminate in favor of Hui Muslims against the dominant Han people, had unintended consequences, leading to economic pressure on Muslims (Shinbo, 2018: 80 and Unno, 2020: 107). The Japanese failed to comprehend the emotions of Hui Muslims and ultimately lost in the competition and battle with the Chinese nationalist state (Shimada, 2015: 69-70). After Japan's defeat in the war, Muslims, blamed as Japanese collaborators, faced a pitiful fate as traitorous Chinese (Unno, 2020: 110).

The signing of the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact on August 23, 1939, created mistrust among the Japanese towards Germany, leading to a revision of Japan's diplomatic policy (Omoso, 2004: 120). Consequently, Japan shifted its focus to the Doctrine of Expansion into Southeastern Asia (Java and Malaya), where, despite initial mistakes, the military management headquarters, with the cooperation of Japanese Muslims and collaboration with local Muslims, successfully mobilized against the Dutch colonial state (Shimada, 2015: 69-70).

Conclusion

The Axis powers, with Japan playing a significant role, exerted a short-lived yet impactful influence on the Islamic world during World War II. This influence, though brief on the international stage, had lasting repercussions on the political and social structures of regions including the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and parts of northern China. The Japanese Imperial Army recognized the ideological significance of Chinese Muslims and the geopolitical importance of Muslim-populated regions, leading to their strategic efforts to infiltrate the Islamic world through these communities. This was reflected in the implementation of a special Islamic policy, as well as cultural and educational campaigns.

However, the Japanese encountered challenges and contradictions in their approach, which resulted in a misrecognition of the religious beliefs, emotions, and lifestyle of Chinese Muslims. Despite attempts

1. Ryōsaikenbo / 良妻賢母

2. Chūgoku kaikyō seinen-dan / 中国回教青年団

to employ assimilation policies, social integration¹ strategies, and the Divide and Rule policy, the Japanese failed to successfully attract Chinese Muslims. Collaborations with Muslim groups and the establishment of organizations such as the Muslim League and the Chinese Muslim Youth League had unintended consequences. Chinese Muslims who collaborated with Japan were later stigmatized as traitors, enduring shame and negative consequences in the post-war period. Finally, the Japanese efforts to establish and maintain a sphere of influence in the Islamic world were marred by contradictions and shortcomings. This underscores the intricate nature of cultural and political interactions during this historical period, highlighting the complexities that arise from attempting to navigate diverse perceptions and identities (Shinbo, 1998: 15; Hammond, 2017: 252). This study contributes to the existing gap in academic research by shedding light on the often overlooked impact of the Axis powers, particularly Japan, on the Islamic world during World War II. By examining the complexities of the Japanese efforts, including their interactions with Chinese Muslims and the unintended consequences that followed, this research provides a deeper understanding of the cultural and political dynamics of the time. By filling this gap, it adds valuable insights to the broader historical narrative and encourages further exploration of this understudied aspect of World War II's aftermath.

1. Dōwa / 同和

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