

## **ABSTRACT**

This paper focuses on the wartime experiences of Aw Boon Haw (1882-1954) who was the renowned billionaire peddler of the Tiger Balm ointment and owner of an influential chain of regional newspapers. He passed away in 1954 as one of the richest and most influential members of the Chinese diaspora. There is an important episode in his life that deserves closer scrutiny. After the Sino-Japanese War broke out in July 1937, he travelled from Singapore to the wartime Chinese capital of Chongqing to meet up with Chiang Kai-shek and his Guomindang 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 businessmen can be entrapped in. Suspicions about his wartime patriotism initially hounded him and he had to parry such accusations by issuing denials. However, in the midst of confusion over the outbreak of Chinese Civil War and the American reversal of occupation policy towards Japan, there was an absence of formal governmental or public actions, allowing the issue to fade away and Aw to return to normalcy with his business and charity. It was more than thirty 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-interrogated, this time calculated to pass a new and presumably permanent verdict that Aw had been most unfairly accused and he was actually an iconic true blue overseas Chinese patriot. This exalted posthumous status was conferred despite the fact that the supposedly new empirical evidences were far from conclusive. It was an act of political restoration in semi-academic garb and enacted with an eye to facilitate further business ties between a resurgent China and the Chinese diaspora.