

BOOK REVIEW

Souchou Yao. *The Malayan Emergency: Essays on a Small, Distant War*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2016.

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The book is an attempt by an anthropologist of Malaysian origin presently teaching in Sydney to make sense of the Malayan Emergency (1948–1960) by looking at the event from a Marxist perspective. For most Malaysians who are used to the official narrative, this approach offers another way of looking at the same episode in their history by providing an explanation of the failed communist (socialist) revolution in Malaya. Coming from Kuala Lumpur, a petty bourgeois background, the author was affected by the Emergency in many ways just like many of his generation. But unlike others he was attracted to Marxism while studying at Adelaide University in the 1960s. At the time and the subsequent decades, the Marxist theory became fashionable among academics all over the world including Malaysia as it provides an exciting underpinning of the social sciences. Later the author was drawn to the New Left ideology of the Frankfurt School and French Marxists like Althusser.

The book is based on careful reading of the published sources like *The Dialogue with Chin Peng* which covers the communist leader's meeting with academics from Australia and Malaysia mainly besides former Special Branch officers that was held at the Australian National University in 1999, as well as memoirs of Malayan Communist Party (MCP) leaders like Abdullah CD, former Kesatuan Melayu Muda (KMM) number two Mustapha Hussein, British military officer Spencer Chapman and an account by a British woman who had stayed behind in the Pahang jungles for the duration of the Japanese occupation under the care of the Malayan Peoples' Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA). Interviews with former communists living in Chulaporn Village No. 10 (Thailand) and those who had gone back to Malaysia after the 1989 Hatyai peace accord considerably strengthened the narrative. Critical use of existing literature on the subject and interviews negates the absence of

archival documents which is required in this kind of studies as the case of Anthony Short and Leon Comber although many see both as effective spokespersons of the British government and the Special Branch respectively. There is a personal side to the narrative—the death of a “cousin” (a fictive kin common among Hakkas in those days) who was an MCP runner who had left a strong impression on the author or the brush his father had, despite the old man’s abhorrence of communist China and loyalty to British colonial rule, with the Special Branch in Kuala Lumpur followed by the enforced short stay in the local police lockup for selling 60 dozens Johnson & Johnson cotton bandages to a Min Yuen operative.

The book is divided into 9 chapters. Nicely titled, these chapters are actually essays which could stand on their own but interconnected with one another. The essays were well written and supported by the relevant studies or oral interviews. The prose is easy to read despite the author’s regular lapses into Marxist diatribes. Chapter One provides the intellectual basis for Britain to hold on to Malaya after 1945 which was indelibly connected with imperial prestige, Malaya’s dollar earning capacity besides substantial British business and investment. But holding on to Malaya came with a high cost in both economic terms and human lives. This means British decolonisation was anything but an orderly retreat. Chapter Two deals with the attraction of communism to the Chinese in Malaya since the 1930s as exemplified by Chin Peng and a post 1989 returnee denoted as Xiao Hong. They and their comrades “saw communism as offering the best, speediest solution to the problems of food and shelter.” As discussed in Chapter Three the Emergency witnessed a high level of violence perpetrated by both sides although Yao only emphasised on those undertaken by the colonial forces (and its local functionaries) on the local population in the new villages.

Of interest is Chapter Four which discusses the MCP failure to turn the squatter-farmers notably of the Kinta Valley into rabid revolutionaries due to the absence of a class consciousness and class ideology. This failure was something the MCP had never fully come to term with. Equally crucial were the many strategies employed by the colonial government with regards to imperial policing notably the role of High Commissioner General Gerald Templer, the Briggs' Plan that cut the linkage between the MCP and its support group the Min Yuen as well as the effective use of propaganda and media. Templer’s role was crucial for he brought about policies and conditions that made independence possible thus nullifying the political meaning of the MCP insurrection. This does not mean life was better on the British side as there were much hardship besides the lack of freedom in the new villages which numbered close to 480

by the end of the Emergency. Chapter Seven highlights the failure of the MCP to mobilise the masses across ethnic lines despite its association with the Parti Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya (PKMM) except with the likes of Abdullah CD and Rashid Maidin. In Chapter Eight the author discusses the significance of the jungle to the MCP insurrection although much of the discussion refers to the pre-1948 period (more rightly the Japanese Occupation) so as to show the humane side of the MPAJA through the eyes of Britons Spencer Chapman and Nona Baker. If the previous chapters served as criticisms on the way the Emergency is currently presented, in the last chapter the author suggests an alternative narrative by relooking at the members of the Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA) and to appraise the political ambitions and tactical failures of the communist revolution in Malaya. This call is commendable as the MCP and its detractors have often blamed extraneous factors for the failure of its revolution rather than looking inward for evaluation.

The Malayan Emergency is a good alternative reading of an important period in Malaysian history which is still contested. It seeks to present the emergency as an ideological war and to downplay the racial aspect of the failed communist revolution. It also downplays the violence committed by communists not just during the Emergency but way back to the last years of the Japanese Occupation when ethnic violence had already taken place in Johor and Perak. Immediately after the occupation the MCP failed to restrain its exuberant followers in a vendetta on collaborators that stirred a racial blood bath in various parts of the peninsula. In the Raub district of Pahang the racial clashes involved former members of Wataniah, the wartime Malay anti-Japanese and pro-British force and elements of the MPAJA. The MCP have touched very little on this but scholars have accepted this as a tactical miscalculation on the part of the party as it cost the MCP crucial support even among Malay radicals within the PKMM.

There are a number of questions which are not adequately addressed. To begin with, many who had joined the communist revolutions did so due to myriad of reasons, not just their conviction that communism provides the best and speediest solution to the problem of food and shelter. One study of women from the non-elite group within the MCP found out few of them cited ardent belief in communism for joining the guerilla movement. This was also true for radicalised Malays who joined the MCP's Tenth Regiment; many did so to escape lengthy internment. This brings us to another point. For most Malay radicals notably those from the KMM and PKMM, their aim was always independence and the upliftment of the Malays who they believed were disadvantaged by capitalist onslaught that include Chinese economic

interests. Undoubtedly most of them abhorred the feudal system but very few of them were into a socialist revolution as pushed by Abdullah CD.

Equally pertinent is the failure of the MCP to transform the Chinese peasants into a viable fighting force. The author claims that these peasants were more attracted to what the colonial government was offering unlike the more nebulous promise of the communist. As rational beings these peasants were able to decide the best course of action at the time. This shows that they were no different from Vietnamese peasants before 1941. Much more crucial is the failure to solicit sustained support from Malay peasants like those in Temerloh district who initially supported their bretherens and kins in the Tenth Regiment that caused a worry among colonial officials in the district. They were perhaps the most depressed class in Pahang. In fact this group failed to benefit from British colonial rule since 1888 while the Japanese Occupation made them ever more ready to support social change as proposed by the PKMM. This study paid little attention to this group who were probably uninterested in communist ideas and rethorics but wanted improvement in their life. There is a discussion on the jungle and jungle craft but nothing on the Orang Asli who were both victims and perpetrators of violence. The violence were committed by colonial forces, by communist insurgents and by the Orang Asli themselves while in recent years there was an attempt to appraise their role in the independence struggle.

Despite the small drawbacks, the book is still a good read offering an alternative view of the Malayan Emergency which are excluded from the national history.

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