

## BOOK REVIEW

*The Malayan Emergency: Essays on a Small, Distant War*, by Souchou Yao.  
Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2016, 178 pp.

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The Malayan Emergency lasting from 1948 to 1960 has merited much scholarly attention since the mid-1950s. We now have a prodigious literature concerning the communist insurgency in Malaya. Having such considerable coverage already given to the topic, what does this new book add to what is already known about the communist struggle?

Souchou Yao, an anthropologist, in his work, *The Malayan Emergency: Essays on a Small, Distant War*, innovatively employs an interdisciplinary approach, drawing a number of concepts and methods from a range of disciplines such as anthropology, socio-political philosophy, oral history, psychoanalysis and cultural studies to re-evaluate the post-war conditions facing Great Britain, the strategic calculations of the late British Empire, the social and political circumstances in Malay, the chancy (mis)calculation of the Empire and the Malayan Communist Party (MCP). In doing so, Yao argues that these factors were crucial to understand the 'why' and 'how' of the Malayan Emergency (p. vii). Indeed, Yao's book, which commits to a historical anthropological perspective through provision of ethnographic depth and the contextualisation of ethnographic detail in historical context, provides a refreshing look at the Emergency and lays bare issues missing in the conventional narrative such as nostalgia and failed revolution, socialist fantasy and ethnic relations, social and moral costs of insurgency and counterinsurgency.

Yao devotes nine thematic chapters to re-explore the Malayan Emergency. The introductory chapter orients readers to see through the delusion created by the British Empire. After the Second World War, Malaya's economic importance to Britain rested not only on dollar earning; it also housed Britain's substantial business assets such as rubber estates and tin mines (p. 16). In order to protect its interests and the trappings of the Empire, Britain carried out aggressive action with strong political will. As a result, the post-war period of imperial retreat turned out to be one of intense military activity. This reveals that Britain's divestment of Empire was messy and bloody instead of orderly and peaceful. Hence, the Emergency, to Yao, opens up the British actions in Malaya to the inner contradictions and moral pretensions of Empire (p. 19).

Chapter 2 seeks to expound why MCP could attract the Chinese to join. Yao interviewed two ex-communists and collected their past experience to explain the reasons for their participation in communist struggle. Uncle Luo, a resident of the Peace Village in Southern Thailand, recounted how excited he was in meeting the communists in his youth and thought the British government would allow the communist to have political power and built a better life for Malayan people (p. 23). While Xiao Hong, who lived with her kin in Kepong, near Kuala Lumpur, recalled that she was always moved by the issues concerning socialist struggle and revolution published in the Chinese leftist literature of the 1950s (p. 34). Clearly, both of them were optimistic that communism seemed to offer a path to modernity and a new world.

Chapter 3 examines the change of the British counter-insurgency strategy from a blending of direct military action and threat and intimidation on the MCP to the war on the civilians. The increasing British repression prompted the MCP to take up arms caught everyone by surprise. In order to deal with the abrupt armed insurrection, the British ruthlessly launched large-scale military offensives (p. 43). The ineptitude of the British in handling the situation caused the undesirable Batang Kali massacre of 1948. Nevertheless, the British strategy shifted to the adoption of the Emergency Regulations that gave the government a wide range powers of arrest and imprisonment as well as banishment overseas (p. 55). Yao conclude that the British approach to counter-insurgency showed a deep understanding of mass psychology and the subtle interplay of benevolence and brutality, reward and punishment (p. 59). This was the genius of imperial policing and it was the key to British success in the counter-insurgency.

In Chapter 4, Yao discusses the failure of the MCP to galvanise the full support of the peasant against the British. He points out that the British government measures and population resettlement were effective to cut off the flow of food and aid from the squatter-farmers to the insurgents. Besides, the squatters-farmers who possessed twin class identities – as farmer-producers and as industrial workers – had multiple allegiances and did not render their support to only one party (p. 74). Yao further adds that the savage behaviour of the communists in sabotaging tin mines and rubber estate and slaying suspected informant prevented some squatter-farmers from willingly and wholeheartedly supporting the communist cause (p. 75). But that was not all. The squatter-farmers, who were often immigrants of some one or two generations back, wanted to make good in their new home and did not eagerly join the revolutionary movement (p. 76).

Yao, in Chapters 5 and 6, examines the 'hearts and minds' approach which began with General Gerald Templer. The former chapter clarifies that hearts and minds was built on a mingling of political pressure and official largesse, military violence and development assistance (p. 91). It did 'win over the population' but was not the only way. The promise of granting independence and transferring political power to a locally-elected, multiracial government also

won hearts and mind. Yet, Yao contends further that the people in the new villages who must have watched and assessed and calculated the situation, decided to submit to Templer's policy (p. 96). The latter chapter reviews the concept and design of a new village. By drawing the concept of 'total institution', Yao notes that a new village was more like a hospital or an old-age home, a benign institution of confinement (p. 105). Under the hearts and minds policy, the new villages were not only measures for life's betterment but also collective punishment for improvement of peace and security. However, the war measures, in Yao's opinion, carried out in the name of development, justice and freedom are unacceptable and disreputable.

Chapter 7 probes into the prevalent view of the Emergency as an essentially Chinese affair. According to Yao, the pluralistic rift in Malaya attributed to the MCP's failure to mobilise the masses across ethnic lines. He asserts that the communal parochialism long nested in the colonial policy of 'divide and rule' was the stumbling block for the MCP to bridge the Chinese-Malay-Indian divide (p. 122). As the MCP tried to extend a hand to the Malay left, they found a fractured political alliance, ideologically uncertain and anchored down by age-old communal preoccupations (p. 127). Worse still, the colonial government's propaganda helped to instil the impression that communist terrorists would be Chinese, while Malays would not join the MCP. Over time, the MCP made itself a party of predominately Chinese leadership and rank and file members.

By dissecting two war recollections, *The Jungle is Neutral* and *Pai Naa: The Story of Nona Baker*, Yao in Chapter 8 reveals the close relationships of British men and women with the communists and their symbolisation of the Empire. Spencer Chapman, a British army officer; Vin Baker, a manager of the Pahang Consolidated Tin Mine; and his sister, Nona Baker, were sheltered, fed, supplied, treated, safeguarded and led through the jungle by the Malayan communists, who fought the Japanese invasion. Chapman and Nona were full of admiration for the communists and certainly they would not have survived the war without their help. However, Vin descended into dejection and died in the jungle while Chapman committed suicide in his later life after suffering bad health and frequent bouts of depression in England. Vin, a believer of the Victorian imperial ideology who upheld the redemptive power of work and industriousness, is perceived as some of the most powerful, the portraits of imperial greed and human frailty in pursuit of the Great Enterprise (p. 144). As for Chapman, he exemplifies the patriotic, clean-limbed and high-minded values of Britishness (p. 151). But the tragic demise of these two Englishmen exposes their inner defencelessness and more importantly signifies the implosion of the British Empire in the Malayan jungle and the forever loss of imperial ideal and prestige.

Yao concludes the story of the Emergency in Chapter 9 with his objective view on communist insurrection. He highly regards the ex-MCP

guerrillas for staking their life on a grand and unparalleled undertakings and yet he alerts the costs of communism. Drawing on the example of Stalinist Soviet Union and Maoist China, Yao contends that a victorious communist movement in Malaya would have turned out to be a bloody, messy and brutal affair. Nevertheless, the writing of an alternative narrative of the Emergency is insisted by Yao to appraise the political ambitions and tactical failure of the communist movement itself (p. 165).

The Malayan Emergency is delineated in the book title as small and distant war but Yao shows that its impact on the politics, community and economy of Malaya was immense and far-reaching. The Emergency Ordinances, for example, which was introduced to deal with the communist insurgents, is extended in the form of other repressive laws to be used against political rivals and dissidents in today's Malaysia (pp. 164–165). Yao's careful reading of a wide range of secondary sources and the thoughts he has given to organising his materials disabuse readers of their fallacious notions concerning the British decolonisation, the hearts and mind approach, the new villages and the MCP.

The language used by Yao is colourful, reflecting his intention to make a more cultural, rather than the usual narrative, presentation. Moreover, every chapter is interspersed with evocative vignettes and provided with analytical snapshots of the complex, unique and distinctive aspects of the Emergency. In this way, Yao makes the book relief from heavy text and hence a particularly light read.

However, the book is not without flaws. Yao draws on a broad range of secondary sources but his reference to primary sources is minimal. His reliance on the scholarly books and articles only reproduces the known information. By going through the colonial files, personal correspondence and diaries, Yao can in fact dig out some undiscovered data, such as the critical economic difficulties and social suffering the workers, especially rubber tappers faced in the late 1940s and early 1950s. It was this desperate plight that had driven the rubber tappers to join the trade unions which were the main support base of the MCP. The rubber tappers later formed the largest memberships of the trade unions in Malaya. Read in such a light, the understanding of readers on the enlistment of Malayan people in MCP can be enriched.

Yao's attempt to recapture the effect of counter-insurgency measures on the ordinary lives by focusing on the Chinese squatters in the new villages is inadequate. Not only the Chinese, the Indians who worked and lived in the rubber estates were also deeply affected. The Indian settlement area, offices, temples and coolie lines in the estates were fenced in by ten feet high barbed wire. There were two gates with Malay guards who would secure tightly and check the workers going in and out. For the Indian family who had member(s) joining the MCP were subject to interrogation, relocation and segregation. If Yao wants to present a more complete picture of the Emergency's impact on the Malayan communities,

he must place as much attention on the other ethnic groups as he does on the Chinese.

Despite these quibbles, this is a finely crafted monograph offering a good array of informative and thought-provoking essays. The nine essays vary in density and in detail, but they are organised in a logical, coherent order to provide a refreshingly candid assessment on the Emergency. Undoubtedly this volume is a worthy addition to the body of scholarship on the Malayan Emergency and it would not only be interest to scholars but also intelligent non-academic readers who seek to advance their knowledge of this crucial period.

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