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

The Malayan Emergency of 1948–60 pitted communist-led insurgents against a British Empire determined not to lose prematurely Malaya's dollar-earning tin and rubber. British officials and officers led a miscellany of Malay police, Chinese Special Branch detectives, a 250,000-strong Home Guard, and troops from all over the empire to victory. By 1960, the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) was holed up at the Thai border, never to return to more than high nuisance status. That victory has been trumpeted in a myriad of works as a counter-insurgency paradigm, a model mix of coercive pressure and persuasive wooing of "hearts and minds", and a case study on how resettlements could blend rigid control with schools, community centres and basketball courts, to eventually produce real communities.

Given the tsunami of works on the Emergency, why read this one? The answer is, in part, that it is a series of interlinked intellectual "essays", each reflecting, in a lively way, on how the Emergency story has been told, as well as what actually happened. In addition, it uses a blend of techniques to combine analysis with an attempt to bring the experience of the conflict alive, and to see it from the viewpoint of the MCP and its supporters. It uses ethnographic reflection on interviews, deploys Marxist-style class analysis to assess why the MCP struggled to keep villagers united behind it, and delves into culture and fiction.

In this vein, Yao presents us with nine chapters, each on a different topic: communism, violence, revolutionary warfare, and so on. For me, the most enjoyable was chapter 2 "On Communism" (pp. 20–39), which weaves an analysis of how people experienced communism around two individuals Yao talked to at a Peace Village for ex-insurgents in Southern Thailand. These individuals capture two broader types of insurgents; the relatively poorly educated fighter from a rural background, and the Chinese-educated idealist. The former is represented by the pragmatic, farming and jungle-edge

based revolutionary family of “Uncle Luo”, the latter by the Chinese-educated Xiao Hong, who joined the fighters as a young woman. Yao uses the latter, in particular, as a departure for a discussion of the progressive atmosphere in post-war Malaya. He sketches in the types of Chinese modern classics, Western classics, socialist-realist works translated into Chinese, and left-leaning supplements in newspapers that influenced Xiao Hong’s generation. With reference to this, he quotes the poem “Girls in White Skirts”, which evokes youth and its yearning for the practical pursuit of progressive ideas, making them ready in the poet’s eye to “walk the glorious path of martyrs” (pp. 36–37). He shows how the vision of seeking justice of the Chinese-educated overlapped with the more “rice-bowl” (p. 38) orientation of men such as “Uncle Luo”, who had admired the wartime anti-Japanese forces. Both sought modernity, albeit from different starting points, and the communists offered it to both.

The author’s tone is at times almost elegiac and melancholic in its evocation of the lost passion and idealism of his and others’ youth of that era; when “violence and bloodshed [seemed] redeemable by the rightness of their causes” (p. 39). Yet the author is not naïve, noting how the pursuit of a socialist Malaya might have meant repressing those who clung to racial and feudal instincts (pp. 133, 160). The almost filmic descriptions of people interviewed might be seen by some as indulgent — although for me they are honest — doing away with the pseudo-objective veneer of blander historical and social science works, and, instead, reminding us that the causes, experience and aftermath of revolution are also about deep emotion and raw feelings. In a sense, the approaches here, the filmic quality, the microhistory, the evocation of the literature of the time, reminds us that for many, joining a revolution was a cocktail of adherence to a pursuit of justice and of romance; romance in the sense of living “a great adventure” (p. 39) in service of good. This chapter is an evocation of the world of the revolutionary, and is a valuable and enjoyable presentation, best read in tandem with chapter 7, “On the Malayan Left”, which analyses the divisions and fragilities within the Malayan Communist Party.

Chapter 3, “On Violence”, makes the additional point that traditional narrations of British counter-insurgency strategy are one-eyed; they justify or downplay British excesses. Hence decapitation — intended as a way of identifying dead guerrillas when it was not possible to transport their corpses from the jungle — is seen as a grim necessity. Even the Batang Kali massacre of twenty-four unarmed Chinese is apologetically dismissed as an aberration, an exception to the rule of British restraint. The chapter also correctly identifies the British colonial administration’s desire to achieve demonstrative effect through the threat of sanctions — the Emergency Regulations — and exemplary operations such as rounding up entire villages in 1949. The author also notes the shift as excesses declined over time and how British colonial policy gradually began to place a greater relative emphasis on the use of persuasive techniques. Yao’s particular contribution to scholarship on this topic is his emphasis on how British colonial policy aimed to generate “control and oppression on a broad front” (p. 59) and that Emergency Regulations “helped to generate the psychology of threat that was the genius of imperial policing” (p. 59).

Chapter 4, “On Revolutionary Warfare”, looks at why the communists could not hold on to rural squatter support in the face of resettlement and pressure by security forces, employing Marxist class analysis to argue that their identity as immigrants and their multiple interests weakened their class potential. Chapters 5 and 6 cover the “hearts and minds” campaign introduced by General — later Field Marshal — Sir Gerald Templer (p. 83). Yao asserts that this campaign was a sophisticated nuancing of British traditions of mixing awe-inducing threats and action with inducements, such that New Village life was one of daily “social assistance and punishment” (p. 86). Both harsh military action and social action contributed to changing minds. As Yao reminds us in chapter 9, imperialism worked because it left opportunities for many, including his shopkeeping father, to make successful lives.

Chapter 8, “On Junglecraft”, meanwhile, offers two vignettes on British experiences in the wartime jungle, one on Spencer Chapman

and the other on the Baker siblings' sojourn with the anti-Japanese forces. These accounts are interlaced with a more general discussion of British writing on empire and Malaya.

Yao's desire to conjure up and re-examine the aspirations and policies of both the old insurgents and the MCP is the glue that binds this work together. In doing so, the book holds a mirror up to the liberal capitalism that won the Cold War. In sum, this book is an enjoyable intellectual discussion on the Malayan Emergency that evokes the compelling fascination and the horrors of communism.

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