

## BOOK REVIEWS

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***My Side of History.* By Chin Peng. Singapore: Media Masters, 2003. Softcover: 527pp.**

For those growing up in Malaysia and Singapore in the 1950s and 1960s, the Chin Peng name was congruent with dogged frightful terror and for some, a heroic sense of awe for all things anti-establishment. Held incommunicado for much of the following decades, his first public appearance in 1999 was a history waiting to be told.

The book is a narration of Chin Peng's experiences as a guerrilla with the CPM — Communist Party of Malaya (until the 1960s, it was called the MCP — Malayan Communist Party) as told to the two writers of the book: Ian Ward and Norma Mirafior. It is a gripping story of a man who devoted his life in pursuit of communist rule in Malaya and Singapore, with its attendant elements of high drama, intrigue, violence, and the tragic outcomes that are still being felt by families in many countries. He was first an anti-Japanese fighter in the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA) in 1942 (p. 67). The CPM had an alliance with the British against Japanese occupation but parted company after the war.

Chin Peng's guerrillas peaked at only 5,000 against the "several hundred thousand troops" of the Allied Forces (p. 26). The hardship the guerrillas had to endure, from deep in their Malayan jungle bases with meagre food often exacted from villagers, was a point Chin Peng did not miss to make to recount his resolve for a liberated Malaya.

Chin Peng was born Ong Boon Hua on 21 October 1924 in Sitiawan,

a small town in the state of Perak in peninsular Malaysia to parents who were reasonably well-off, hardly your stereotypical deprived peasantry of revolutionary struggles. He joined the CPM in January 1940 when he was sixteen years old — by then the party had been in existence for ten years since its formation in Singapore (p. 57). He became the CPM's chief (secretary-general) in 1947. Though it was not officially banned, the party was subject to frequent harassment by the authorities during its early years.

Chin Peng's baptism as a communist began with his readings of Mao Zedong's war against the Japanese and later the Kuomintang (KMT). At the time, overseas Chinese in Malaya were divided between the loyalists of the KMT and the more radical sympathizers of the Communist Party of China (CPC). Young Chinese like Chin Peng were drawn to Mao who they regarded as the epitome of a blossoming Chinese nationalism while the older overseas Chinese stayed faithful to the KMT. Chin Peng was enthralled by Marx and Lenin whose writings, then proscribed by British Malaya, were smuggled into the country by migrant Chinese fleeing from war-torn China. While Mao was fighting the KMT, Chiang Kai Shek, the KMT leader, doled loyal Chinese in Malaya and Singapore to resist the Malayan communists. Chin Peng had, not one, but two adversaries on his hands. But he did not seem to make much of his fight against the KMT and thought rather lowly of its forces (pp. 108–11).

When the Japanese landed at Kota Bahru, the capital of northern Kelantan state, on 8 December 1941, the CPM offered assistance to the British to fight against the invaders. The British were enthusiastic but it was not until 1943 when they had the pro-British clandestine Force 136 work with the CPM (p. 11). The British valued the CPM's contribution in the war effort and many of the CPM's leaders were decorated by the colonial government after the war. Chin Peng himself was awarded the OBE.

With the surrender of the Japanese in August 1945, and upon demobilization of the MPAJA, the CPM decided that since official recognition for its political role was not forthcoming, it would fight against British presence with the aim of self-determination according to the Atlantic Charter and the UN Charter (pp. 161, 375). The party went underground but was not officially banned until the BMA (British Military Administration) ended upon the proclamation of the Malayan Union on 1 April 1946.

The CPM tried to wage peace at the 1955 Baling Talks but Chin Peng intimated that he had vainly pressed for too many concessions

from the three-man panel of the Tunku (the United Malays National Organisation president and later to be Malaya's first prime minister), David Marshall (then Singapore's chief minister), and Tan Cheng Lock (the Malayan Chinese Association president), knowing full well that their brief was only to explain terms of amnesty and not to negotiate peace terms (p. 364). Chin Peng was fervent in his belief that CPM recognition and acceptance of its role in political life was fundamental to any peace terms (p. 370). His parting shot to the Tunku at the talks was, "If you demand our surrender, we would prefer to fight to the last man" (p. 386).

The CPM's position was untenable. It decided to step up its guerrilla warfare but its campaign was anything but successful as it got driven out further north and over the Malayan border into Thai territory where it was given safe haven by the Thai government on the promise that it would not be involved in Thai politics. Chin Peng credited British success to the Briggs Plan, which created fenced-off "new villages" patrolled by local "Home Guard" vigilantes near many of the CPM's jungle hideouts, virtually cutting off food supply for the CPM (p. 280).

The CPM persisted in its resistance despite Malaya's independence being achieved in 1957. The CPM remained stuck and isolated in the remote jungles of southern Thailand. During this time and right through the 1970s, Chin Peng spent much of his time in Beijing drumming up both material and ideological support for his much-depleted forces in the Betong area of Thailand. The CPM, though, continued with its tirade against Malaysia, which he claimed was a neo-colonialist plot (p. 437) despite the fact that China was later to recognize the nation.

A number of developments soon saw the CPM fast disintegrating. First of all, there was the internal infraction in the party that split it three ways. Then there was Indonesia's *Konfrontasi* (1963–65) which brought sympathetic attention to Malaysia and muted the CPM's cause. Later, there was Tun Razak's visit to China in 1974, and Lee Kuan Yew's "successful" visit in November of 1980 (p. 457). Chin Peng was also under pressure to dismantle the CPM's radio station in Hunan and that happened on 30 June 1981, effectively severing a crucial moral base from which he had enjoyed transmitting propaganda broadcast for decades. The consequence of this was that China was no longer seen to be interested in the CPM. This had, in fact, been preceded by the 1978 accession of Deng Xiao Ping with whom Chin Peng had less than warm relations (pp. 457–59). The former was reported to have said, on his visit to Kuala Lumpur in 1974, that "China henceforth ... regarded her relationship with the CPM as a fact of history — something that should be left behind" (p. 483). With Chinese patronage at its lowest ebb, Chin

Peng courted peace through the auspices of the Thai military, and in 1989, signed a peace accord with the Mahathir government. Never to accede to a surrender, the document marked the demise of the CPM.

The book has 32 chapters. The first chapter opens, somewhat, in the middle of Chin Peng's story, detailing the beginnings of the CPM alliance with the British. In the following four chapters he talks about political induction and early experiences in the CPM. In chapters 7 through 12, he talks about his relationships with Force 136, the British anti-Japanese group, British awards to him and his comrades on their contribution to anti-Japanese resistance. He talks at length about his disappointments with the British, and the failure of the latter to properly accord him and the CPM political legitimacy.

He devotes chapter 20 to Lee Meng, a loyal CPM activist who was arrested and put on trial for possession of arms. Lee Meng's defence was that it was a case of mistaken identification. She alleged that she was not the terrorist whose picture showed a woman with a hand grenade dangling conspicuously on her waist. The trial attracted international attention and through petitions, some from British members of parliament, and an adept defence, Lee Meng was discharged.

It is a mystery why Chin Peng would talk so much about Lee Meng. Chin Peng stressed that Lee Meng was indeed the notorious terrorist the British had always claimed her to be but for her steadfast denial that obviously had the prosecution duped. Reading between the lines, it seems Chin Peng himself was not altogether sure of Lee Meng's identity. He made much of Lee Meng's banishment to China and his eventual meeting with her there, to assure himself that he really knew who the real Lee Meng was. It is doubtful if Lee Meng herself had revealed anything to Chin Peng.

In chapters 21 to 26, he discusses the abortive peace efforts of the Baling Talks and the return to armed insurgency. Much of the next two chapters are on the problems of the CPM, the splits, and the betrayals. The last three chapters touch on the loss of China's patronage for the CPM and Chin Peng's overtures for peace with the Malaysian authorities through Thai mediation. In the last chapter, perhaps the most poignant in the book, Chin Peng expresses his disappointment and sorrow for a failed cause and his yearning to return to Malaysia which he first attempted in 1999. Six years on, Chin Peng is still battling the Malaysian courts for a reprieve.

### *Comments*

The book has a good story-telling tone with competent language. It is

well put together despite the somewhat haphazard chronology. However, there are large swathes of broken tone, which suggest that certain passages are apparently not Chin Peng's verbatim narration. While it only minimally affected the flow of the language, it is sometimes disconcerting when the story alternates between the first and third person.

Chin Peng's rancour against the British is made abundantly clear in the book and with it some very obvious bias which unfortunately blurs the lines of fact and emotion. This is perplexing given that for the good part of British rule, the CPM had enjoyed official recognition, albeit a rocky one. He speaks fondly of some British officers but seems nonchalant with the callous killings of British civilians (though he did express dismay at the killing of one young planter). His main gripe had been against the cruelty the British administration and the expatriate planters and miners had meted out on the locals. We do hear from time-to-time of British high-handedness, aloofness, and mean authoritarianism but there is no documented evidence of widespread ill-treatment by the British nor the expatriates.

If waging a war against the British was about liberation, Chin Peng did not say how he was to achieve it. When Britain showed its willingness to leave Malaya following the Baling Talks, there was no let up of the CPM violence. Indeed, the CPM fought on even after independence in 1957. In fairness to Chin Peng, he never spurned peace overtures but these were often marred by unacceptable terms and his arrogance. But then, by that time he was hardly ever in the jungle camps of Betong in southern Thailand. He chose to direct the insurgency from his ideological base in Beijing. In fact, there is very little, if any, of Chin Peng engaging in skirmishes at any time of the insurgency in the book.

The Malayan Emergency was a totally futile war, and the CPM was on the backfoot for much of the time. That it took nearly three decades after independence to finally call it a day underlined Chin Peng's intractable determination to a lost cause.

Chin Peng is appealing for his return to Malaysia, his country of birth, a country he claims to love so much but with whom he waged a bloody war that is still fresh on the minds of some war veterans. It is clear that Chin Peng is somewhat less than willing to bare it all in this book. He makes the point that the book is not the history of the CPM; this is a pity as every interested reader would welcome the valuable insights of the historical records of the CPM and its struggle in the Malayan Emergency. This book seeks to vindicate misconceptions about Chin Peng although it does seem to struggle between fact and

supposition. Nonetheless, the book is a narrative that is certainly worth reading.

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***Regionalism in Post-Suharto Indonesia.* Edited by Maribeth Erb, Priyambudi Sulistiyanto, and Carole Faucher. London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005. Hardcover: 234pp.**

Indonesia is currently attempting to redistribute political power away from the unitary republic for a more decentralized system in which decisions would increasingly be made at the provincial and local levels. Progress towards that goal was the subject of a seminar in Singapore in May 2002 attended by a number of social scientists at universities and special research centres in Europe and Southeast Asia. Many of the papers presented at that seminar have been included in this anthology, with a third of the authors coming from Indonesia. Significantly, there are no weak articles in the anthology and they come together as a whole to give a good portrait of the Indonesian nation, which is unique among recent books describing the structure and policy formulations of that country.

Maribeth Erb, the lead editor of this anthology, sets the political tone of the anthology in the opening article, severely judging the New Order government for its authoritarianism, its paternalism, and its corruption. She notes that efforts at reform in the post-Suharto government have been slow, accompanied by considerable inefficiency, outright stalling, and attempts by some groups to bring the emerging decentralized system under the control of self-serving interests. She is particularly concerned about the manipulators whom she claims are closely associated with the New Order, who are portrayed as promoters of corruption and who thwart the growth of democracy in Indonesia. She makes clear that she sides with the reformers who are interested in devolution of power within the political system and she infers that the other authors of the various articles are in agreement with her viewpoint. This may well be so, but their presentations usually avoid such unequivocal judgements.

The articles fall into three general categories. The first category