

RAINBOW: An Epic Story of Heroic Fighters for Independence by Lin Yan, Labis Johor: Huai Lie Enterprise, 2013, 388pp. (Softcover ISBN 978-967-10478-1-1).

Malayan history is never complete without the inclusion of the warring days of the Japanese, the British, and the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM). For a long time, interested parties and scholars alike have been referring to the “official” versions of events. Resorting to oral history by eye-witnesses has provided renewed discourse on the “people’s history” to complement the “official” histories. On the CPM, Chen Peng’s *My Side of History* (Media Masters, Singapore) published in 2003 is one of the first to reveal the “other” side of the story.

Lin Yan, whose real name is Wang Jun Yong, was born in 1932. He had a taste of life under the Japanese military occupation and the post-war years prior to independence in 1957. He later studied in China, and is now peacefully retired in Australia. *Rainbow* is an auto-biographical account of life in the war-torn days of the Japanese Occupation and the Emergency declared by the returned British administration in 1948 and lifted by the Malayan Government in 1960.

The narrative provides glimpses into the life of the Malayan people especially of the 1930s to the 1950s. The Chinese who lived in the towns earned their living as traders and retailers and led a way of life tied to their religion and culture. The brutal treatment of the Japanese invaders and the post-war resumption of British rule had challenged the right of Malaysians to a better life. Hence their urge to fight for justice and what they stood up for. Armed with these simple but powerful ideals, the author and many others before and after him engaged in a prolonged movement, initially to resist Japanese aggression, and subsequently to fight for independence from the British. To the author, those who had sacrificed in their valiant efforts in the service of the country deserve to be looked upon as “heroes” and “heroic fighters”.

The book title evokes expectations of awe-inspiring heroic acts. Indeed, the book is replete with the author’s ideas of heroes in a rapid succession of events, with many paying the ultimate price in their twenties. The author does not offer any definition of “hero” or “heroic fighter”. These were recognized according to his personal criteria of having rendered service to the country for a patriotic cause, that is, resistance against Japanese invasion or the struggle for independence and having paid the ultimate price for it. But to continue the narrative after independence in 1957, the use of these descriptions would be increasingly difficult to justify. In contrast, the colonial authorities were definitive in their use of the words “bandits” and “terrorists” in their ideological battle with what were regarded as “anti-government” rebels.

Lin Yan’s first heroes were those in his own family: his father, mother, brother, and sister. This list is then extended to include his cousins, friends, and fighters from Singapore. Then there

were those in the Japanese prison breakouts, the numerous unyielding anti-Japanese martyrs, and those who maintained the peace after the announcement of Japanese surrender. Too modest to dub himself a hero, Lin Yan played his rightful part in supporting his comrades, dedicating poems to his heroes for the memory of posterity, and showing his admiration and respect as a means to boost their morale.

The narrative is spread over 29 disjointed chapters, reflecting the typical characteristic of auto-biographical accounts of the Japanese Occupation and Emergency years by persons who are now advanced in age and who try to put down their memories and experiences on record. The author is well aware of this shortcoming and is apologetic in writing about past events in “bits and pieces”. However, the value of the narrative is in the details on certain past events on which little is known.

The chapters are grouped under three sections as the author recalls life during the war-ridden years of the Japanese Occupation, the struggle from the jungle during the Emergency, and an account of heroes and former comrade-in-arms.

Lin Yan’s biography is reminiscent of those of many Chinese immigrants of pre-independence days. He speaks of his childhood and education in the small town of Kajang south of Kuala Lumpur. He remembers the atrocities of the Japanese aggressors but had no good words for the fleeing British either. The Japanese were ruthless, and the British army was outwardly strong but “inwardly weak, stupid and incompetent”. The Japanese fascist policy of “loot all, burn all, kill all” was meant to exact maximum destruction and fear, and was coupled with the brutal use of tortures and commitment of atrocities such as rape and massacres. One of the most notorious massacres took place in 1942 in the township of Titi in Negeri Sembilan in which children and women were not spared. Remembered too was the mass break-out from Pudu prison in Kuala Lumpur in 1943. The resistance against the Japanese by the Malayan People’s Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA) won the recognition of the deposed British who were still hoping to defeat the Japanese. The end of Japanese Occupation saw ethnic clashes instigated by the Japanese and the subsequent British clampdown on the Chinese and the disbanding of the MPAJA and harsh treatment of workers who went on strikes. The onset of Emergency rule began with, among others, the detention of activists and the suppression of workers. The story also tells of the mass rallies and marches in Kajang on May 1, 1948; British trumped-up charges; bloodshed in Sungai Siput; the ill treatment of workers; the banning of newspapers; and the closing of Chinese schools such the Wah Chiao School in Kajang. All these had compelled a return to underground resistance.

The second part extends the tale to the immediate post-war years of political struggles between CPM and the colonial government. The story begins with the mass arrest on June 20, 1948 of many in Kajang, including the author’s brother, suspected of leftish activities.

A peninsula-wide Emergency Act was introduced and the CPM and numerous Chinese and worker organizations were outlawed, and 600 CPM members arrested. At age 17, the author joined his friends to carry on the anti-colonial struggle in the jungle. His training in the jungle camp and the emphasis on the four main rules of discipline and ten points for attention was reminiscent of life in the Red Army of China.

The final part recounts the life of “heroes” such as Liu Guan Jin, described as an earth-shaking hero against imperialism; Qiu Shui Sheng, a veteran who dedicated his life to the revolutionary movement; Lao Tie, an international fighter; Gu Ning and Yu Jie as revolutionary martyrs; and numerous others who fought for democracy and freedom from colonialism.

This is the account of a person whose life and work were connected with Malaysia for up to 60 years. Its purpose is to record “the figures and events that I had witnessed and heard half a century ago”, though with unavoidable “errors and omissions”. In recent years numerous publications on the Japanese Occupation and Emergency years have appeared, penned by surviving eyewitnesses of the period or amateur historians and largely written in Chinese. *Rainbow* is rather special as it is an account of facets of life and events of the period in English.

This book is written in simple narrative style that succeeds in sharing with the reader the feelings of admiration and pain of a youthful author living at a time of political turmoil in Malaya. Digging deep into the memory of his youthful days, the author has made available details of life and events of the 1940s to the early 1950s that are little known until today. The language is apologetic, and readers might feel that the author was wistful while narrating his story.

Despite the fact that *Rainbow* is a personal tale of life and events of the 1930s to 1950s, its first-hand account would certainly help to construct a more comprehensive history of the Japanese Occupation and the Emergency period. This and other similar titles dealing with the period do provide snippets of evidence on the brutality of Japanese aggression and doubts on the reliability of British colonial sources on the counter-insurgency campaign during the Emergency.

The book would read better if it is appended with a glossary on such words as *baohu*, *belacan*, *hartal* or *surau*, and acronyms such as CPM, MPAJA, ABSDC, and MNLA. These words often crop up and the need to trace back to earlier explanations adds to the disjointed flow of thoughts. As the key characters in the book have nicknames, given names, and aliases, a listing of these characters may help the readers to keep track of the broad outline as the story unfolds.

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