

Book Review

Review of the book *Narratives from Piyamit: Life Stories at the End of the Revolution* by Jason Sze-Chieh Ng & Murray Hunter. SIRD and New Era University College, Malaysia, 2024, 249 pp. ISBN:978-629-7575-33-9

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The book is of great interest to researchers and readers eager to know more about the personal experience and reflections of fighters of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) in Southern Thailand before they laid down arms for a peaceful settlement with the Thai and Malaysian authorities in 1989. It is unique in the sense that the two authors went deep into the resettlement villages for a close observation and sincere dialogue with the former revolutionaries who told them their past.

The book narratives are apparently published too late to cover the first-generation anti-colonial and anti-capitalist MCP pioneers of the Malayan Emergency (1948–1960), for they all had passed away decades ago. Those who were interviewed indeed joined in the MCP struggle mostly in the late 1960s and the 1970s at a period known as the Second Emergency. As revealed in their narratives, they were mostly from disadvantaged social groups, their motive primarily was to seek social justice, not anti-colonial or anti-capitalism but more anti-discrimination of official policies.

In this aspect, James Rush in the Forward rightly said there is little memory in the interviews over the controversy and conflicts of orthodox or non-orthodox Marxist ideology that split the MCP into three factions. Rather, the narratives are focused on the discontent over the interviewees' own poverty, and discontent over the New Economic Policy's race-biases in which they were the victims. It is therefore seen as one of the weaknesses of the book for not interpreting sufficiently why the struggle target shifted substantively from the First Emergency to the Second Emergency period.

Chapters 1 and 2 give a useful account of the British colonial administration and its conflicts

with the MCP. MCP's anti-colonial struggle and its recruitment exercise were met with colonial suppressive measures during the 1930s before they became allies to fight the Japanese invaders in 1942–1945. Their collaboration collapsed after the Japanese defeat and their armed conflicts began in the Emergency which ended with the MCP remnants being forced to settle in Southern Thailand in the late 1950s.

The narratives go on to provide a brief history of left-wing movements in the post-1960s era until the end of 1989 when the MCP gave up their armed struggle with a peace agreement. The discussion of the actions of the New Economic Policy coupled with social disorders, demise of the Labour Party and reorganisation of the MCP to face new challenges and new recruitment exercises has added valuable weight to the book. By the end of the 1980s, the remaining 2,000 or so fighters after going through various degrees of hardship and ideological struggle, finally decided to fold up and start a new life away the jungle hideouts.

Chapters 3 and 4 introduce the defence mechanism in the Betong region of south Thailand during the Second Emergency period, inclusive of weaponry fabrication, medicare and the routine training and education. Being weaker in arms and numbers, their defence was military subsistence, avoiding direct confrontation with either the Malaysian or Thai armed forces. Life of one of the two ex-MCP factions in the Friendship Village (Piyamit 1) after they left the jungle was given great details – their humble backgrounds and origins and how they were brought from major cities to the jungle.

The remaining substantial part of the book is made up of individual interviews, each with personal details and an account of unique experience. It is overall quite standard and descriptive, giving little analytical values to the book. Despite this generality, the book is worth a read for its great effort in digging out the hearts and minds of the ex-fighters to the open.

Overall, the continuation of the struggle after the failure of the first generation was difficult to justify. The eventual surrender was a realisation of the futility of the anti-official “ideology.”

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