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Jungle Lives: Malaya's Counter-Insurgency War through the Eyes of the Retired Malayan Communists

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Abstract

What is known about the low-intensity conflict historically known as the "Malayan Emergency" were predominantly told from the perspectives of the victorious British and its Malayan allies. Veterans of the Malayan Campaign often depict this conflict as a classic tale of democracy triumphing communism, a veritable example of good versus evil. Nonetheless, this narrative is profoundly troubling as it is completely one dimensional and ignores the perspectives of their opponents, the now-defunct Malayan Communist Party (MCP). This article uses the memoirs of two former Malayan communist guerrillas, Zhang Zuo and Yi Chuan, to explore the factors driving these men and women to willingly take up arms once again to expel the British following the devastating anti-Japanese resistance during the Second World War. Through analyses of their writings, it is discovered that they were mainly motivated by intensely personal reasons as opposed to being part of a global Marxist conspiracy. These publications essentially challenged contemporary history that long situated the Malayan conflict as merely another front in the greater Cold War while at the same time exposes another hidden, very personal, chapter of the Malayan communists' war for Malaya.

Keywords: Cold War, Malaya, communists, memoirs, Emergency

Introduction

The communist counter-insurgency war in Malaysia, that began with the execution of three European planters in 1948 and ended with the Malayan communists' retreat to southern Thailand by 1960, officially known as the "Emergency" has been hailed in contemporary history as a

successful example of checking the spread of communism in Southeast Asia. It was also hailed as one of the earliest successful implementations of a strategic programme designed to deny popular support to insurgents. Scholars and veterans of the conflict have dissected, analysed, and came up with their assertions, agreeing that it was a victory over a malicious ideology that was antithesis to ideals of western democracy and that its defeat at the hands of government forces was a satisfying conclusion, for better or worse. The glowing, rosy impression on the counter-insurgency campaign in Malaya was framed in a simplistic binary of good versus evil. Hence, the British promoted that it was their altruism that saved Malaya and proceed to paint their adversary as bereft of common decency. Take for example, Anthony Short, former British soldier in Malaya and later historian, explicitly pointed out that the MCP was a band of murderous thugs (Short, 2000), while Leon Comber, the former head of the Malayan Special Branch and a scholar on the Emergency, also argued out that the impetus for a Malayan communist revolution was indeed influenced by the global revolutionary fever of post-World War II (2009). Both were former members of the Malayan security forces and their views were firmly influenced by their experience on the battlefield. Moreover, Richard Stubbs and Richard Clutterbuck, an academic and a former serviceman respectively, also affirmed that it was democracy, and its military might, that eventually vanquished the vile MCP (Stubbs, 2004; Clutterbuck, 1966). These one-dimensional arguments were convenient and powerful when their enemies had no avenue to express themselves through the censorship blanket being thrown over the topic. But the arguments presented by these scholars firmly had its roots in Gene Z. Hanrahan's seminal book *The Communist Struggle in Malaya* which sets much of the accepted understanding over the insurgency (Hanrahan, 1979). Unlike previous Western scholars, Hanrahan was Chinese-literate and was therefore able to read captured MCP documents when doing his research. This led him to assume that the Malayan communists were ostensibly linked to the Chinese Communist Party in Beijing and therefore were acting on their explicit orders. Unfortunately, this narrative became accepted truth for decades.

However, in recent years, scholars such as Kevin Blackburn and Karl Hack has offered a different perspective by noting that it was the issue of granting voice to the former communists' past struggles that makes any deviation from the state-sanctioned narrative a controversy in and of itself (Blackburn and Hack, 2012). Independent Singaporean scholar, C.C. Chin, even pointed out that the outbreak of the Emergency in 1948 was forced upon the MCP when the British began massive crackdowns on the movement in June of the same year as shown in recovered Party documents from the period (Chin, 2009), while historian Anna Belogurova even showed that there was no Comintern directive for the MCP to launch an armed struggle in the name of global communist revolution since 1930 by looking into Soviet archives in Moscow (Belogurova, 2014). Perhaps, noteworthily, former Party Secretary General Chin Peng himself had long confirmed C.C. Chin and Belogurova's arguments in a series of interviews and through his memoir (Chin, 2003; 2004). Even more so, Marc Opper, one of the latest scholars to study this conflict, points out that the demonizing narrative over the war

against the Malayan communists originated from copious propaganda efforts by the British to paint it as a mere "emergency" and not a full-scale shooting war (Opper, 2018). But the singular research on the Malayan communist guerrillas as an individual was done by Lucian Pye who conducted interviews on surrendered guerrillas (Pye, 1956). Nonetheless, Pye's book is problematic: his interviewees were men and women who surrendered, and many were from the lower ranks who left the Party due to personal reasons or grievances. In addition, the interviews were done in prisons and the transcripts were never revealed. While ground-breaking, Pye's research is fundamentally flawed as the narrative obtained from these individuals were for the benefit of the prisoners themselves who were seeking better treatment by agreeing to speak to Pye. It was never a voluntary recollection. As we can see, the literature on the MCP's armed struggle has been expanding, but the original master narrative persists.

Therefore, what is glaringly missing are perspectives from 'the other side', namely the defeated Malayan communists. This severe unbalanced account did not address the factors or the catalysts that initially sparked the insurgency nor did it allow the former insurgents themselves to speak of their motivations for prosecuting the war. However, contemporary explanations for the origin of the fifty-year-long armed struggle points to both overt and covert Cold War manoeuvrings between the United Kingdom and the People's Republic of China. This is a general view from the top, explaining the conflict as another front in the greater Cold War struggle. Yet, the armed struggle could not be easily explained as such, for the real factors that drove the communists to wage war against, first, the British and, later, the Malayan/Malaysian government remains hidden from contemporary history, and therefore can only be surmised from the memoirs of the Malayan communists themselves. To date, there are at least a dozen posthumously published memoirs by these retirees (both men and women), each with unique life stories covering time periods that ranged from the anti-Japanese period to the end of the struggle in 1989. For this article, I will investigate the lives of two mid-level MCP cadre's posthumous memoirs. They are chosen because their life stories were the closest candid, albeit somewhat reserved, exposition of two individuals' journey from disgruntled youth to committed revolutionaries.

This article proposes that memoirs by retired Malayan communists were written not merely to cast their personal history as a confession or an apology, but instead to reaffirm their anti-colonial convictions that were influenced and reinforced by their lives spent in the jungles of Malaysia. The existence of these narratives therefore profoundly changes our understanding of the long communist insurgency as more intensely personal that did not necessarily align with what was explained by contemporary accounts. This argument is founded upon the retired communists' narration of their own life journeys in the memoirs, on the premise that their individual identities—the conscious constitution of their "selves" -can be examined from their published writings which in essence reflects the very personal motivations for their decision to take up arms.

The Communists and Malaya

Zhang Zuo, commander of the Malayan National Liberation Army's 6th Shock Brigade, once commented about Malaya in this way:

> "No matter how our nation's history is written, the nation's natural conditions and the fruits of the people's labours certainly make it a lovely place. It is because of that loveliness that all the patriots were willing to contribute their efforts to it. It is also because of their deep love for the homeland that its heroic sons and daughters were able to have the courage to defend it and give up their lives for its independence." (Zhang, 2008, p. 5 [Translation by author]).

His comrade, Yi Chuan, who worked with the tribal *Orang Asal* people of Malaysia, also wrote in his memoir that:

> "Although we do not fully comprehend what is a revolution, but we have one conviction: 'humans need liberation, the poor needs to stand up, other than the revolution, there is no other path.' Under this great calling, we have walked down many hard paths unendurable by many. Some comrades had sacrificed everything for the homeland's independence, while others persisted for decades until the 'honourable reconciliation' and walked out from the jungles." (Yi Chuan, 2012, p. 64-65 [Translation by author]).

These snippets from the writings of retired Malayan communists speak of their convictions, which remain indelible in the twilight years of their lives. No doubt these memoirs were written to leave behind a legacy of their work. Yet, at the same time, it also reveals the writers' fervent vision of a Malaya that never came to pass. In fact, these, and subsequent memoirs by retired MCP guerrillas, were written in the context of a country where public understandings of the MCP were restricted to the label of 'terrorists.' The revelations contained within the memoirs then became an exposition of an unseen side of so-called 'traitors' and 'enemies' of the state whose life journeys were unlike what the nation's historical master narrative projected. The individuality and humanity revealed by these former MCP guerrillas is both troubling and controversial as it ran against the supposed monolithic and facelessness of the movement as espoused by the authorities. The raison d'etre for the continued suppression of the MCP's past in Malaya by Malaysian government censors today is still firmly based upon this argument.

Using Memoirs

G. Thomas Couser defines memoir as non-fictional life narratives which are generally more focused and selective than autobiographies (Couser, 2012). In other words, memoirs are records of actual human experience and require a particular way of writing. Indeed, memoirs

make use of novelistic techniques but depict lives of real, not imagined, individuals. Although often assumed to be synonymous and interchangeable with autobiographies, these two kinds of self-writing are subtly different, as memoirs can also be used to narrate about someone other than the author. In fact, both Zhang Zuo and Yi Chuan made use of this device extensively in their writings, ostensibly to distance themselves from certain events or to place themselves as willing participants (or as victims without agency) in incidents that occurred in their lives. Julie Rak has also shown that memoirs have been used to refer to both first and third-person narratives in private and public, as well as for both unofficial and official life writing (Rak, 2013). Therefore, the narrative of a memoir is expected to be impressionistic and subjective since it is primarily based on memory. This is one of the main reasons that Zhang Zuo and Yi Chuan's memoir were chosen as case studies into the lives of retired Malayan communists. The other reason being their memoirs were some of the more extensive and somewhat detailed publications of retired Malayan communists currently available. Most importantly, their memoirs were chosen because I am interested in the projected impressions of their self-identity. I will also note that while Zhang Zuo and Yi Chuan were active in the armed struggle at different time periods (the 1970s-1980s and the 1950s, respectively), nonetheless their life stories provide intimate knowledge of the Malayan communists' lives at different junctures of history with divergent experiences.

Moreover, memoirs can also be politicized. In what George Egerton calls "...a form of political projection...," they are a writer's attempt to leave behind a record of his or her deeds (Egerton, 1994, p. 1-2). Thus, the two authors I have selected uses personal political experiences to construct a narrative that is retrospective and reflective, with the 'self' as the locus. Hence, memoirs can be an interpretation of the authors' individuality that, in the case of Zhang Zuo and Yi Chuan, both intertwines and supports their political convictions.

Malaya's Missing Past

Professor Wang Gungwu once wrote that individuality was never the focus in traditional Asian biographical writing and that the portrayal of 'self', both inner and outer, "the quiescent and creative, the public and private, was more relevant" (Wang, 1974). But for various reasons modern autobiographical writing developed late in Southeast Asia, and it was not until the 20th Century that scattered autobiographies began to appear. In Malaysia, the rise of modern political culture, a vestige of British colonialism, led to autobiographies of great leaders. In the 21st century, a rising trend of autobiographical writing has permeated the nation, but the genre remains limited to social elites.

One of the earliest Malayan autobiographical works was the *Hikayat Abdullah* by renowned Malay Muslim teacher, Munshi Abdullah, in 1849 (1969). The *Hikayat* is filled with life experiences of the author; it provides vivid details of 19th century society in Malaya and Singapore as well as his personal observations of life in that era. Interestingly, modern life

writing in Malaya/Malaysia would not reappear for more than a century later, indeed until after independence with publications by former prime ministers such as Tunku Abdul Rahman's autobiographical *Looking Back* (1977) and Dr Mahathir Mohammed's *A Doctor in the House* (2011). The latter was especially fascinating given that Mahathir called his reminiscences a memoir which narrates the life journey of a simple schoolboy from Kedah to his stewardship of a nation struggling to industrialize in the dawn of globalization in Southeast Asia. In fact, these post-colonial nationalist writings are part of what Philip Holden calls "national autobiography," a larger genre in which the growth of an individual is associated with the author's role as father or leader of a nation which parallels with the growth of a national consciousness and the early achievement of the independent nation-state (Holden, 2008).

As a sub-genre of autobiography, memoirs have become a preferred style of life writing. Chinese rebel outcasts, such as the former Malayan communists, usually led interesting lives filled with difficult decisions and profound personal doubts along with deep discussions on their individuality as depicted within the memoirs (Wang, 1974). These 'traitors' (according to official Malaysian government terminology) have often been relegated to the back pages of conventional history, demonized in various media, and often depicted as a faceless, shadowy enemy bereft of human characteristics or sensibilities. From old British propaganda fare such as *Operation Malaya*, to the locally produced *Bukit Kepong*, and to the recently released *The Garden of Evening Mists*, the Malayan communist guerrillas were depicted in each production as armed savage thugs whose appearance were akin to ghostly phantoms, appearing and leaving at will. Therefore, when the controversial memoir of Chin Peng, the late MCP secretary general, was released in 2003, it incontrovertibly provoked debate and, inevitably, led to scholarly questions about the relative sterility of biographies from the vanquished Malayan left. In the years following the publication of Chin Peng's polemical book, more memoirs from Party retirees have surfaced. Each one is a fascinating read and each revealed unique parts of the communist insurgency. Together, they reconstructed a lost era that is slowly fading from contemporary Malaysian consciousness. Danny Wong Tze Ken from the University of Malaya has asserted that the emergence of these memoirs raises the possibility of providing fresh perspectives on the early Cold War era in Malaysia and, in turn, Southeast Asia. These memoirs provided an insider's view of the MCP's efforts to liberate the country from British control, while providing an alternative account of Malayan/Malaysian history of the period (Wong, 2012).

Before we proceed further, it is important to briefly sketch out the historiography of communism in Malaya/Malaysia's history. Literature on the communist insurgency in Malaya/Malaysia is mostly derived from British colonial government sources and primary materials from individuals who lived and worked in Malaya as members of the public or in the civil and security services. The narratives contained within are celebratory in nature, a confirmation of good overcoming evil, of light banishing darkness. In other words, an affirmation of British colonial rule, and by extension the righteousness of Western democratic ideals triumphing over the attempted enslavement of the people's free will and liberty. These sources

strongly depicts the MCP as part of a global Marxist conspiracy, the suppression of which was done in the name of stopping the spread of communism in Southeast Asia. As a result, views of the Party and the communists in general have been coloured and shaped by biased narratives with a profound British skew. In fact, it was pointed out by scholars that the real reason the British's heavy-handed response to the communists were driven mainly by their desperate need to defend their currency which underlines their rapidly collapsing empire after World War II (Yao, 2016). The contemporary framing of the military campaign in Malaya therefore could not be situated within the Cold War argument. Indeed, it was merely British economic and financial self-preservation that had fuelled the war. Yet, despite this revelation, alternative sources to explain the MCP and its objectives were often side-lined or outright dismissed as enemy propaganda given that they were predominantly written in Chinese. The emergence of published writings by retired Party members provided (some posthumously), for the first time, perspectives of the long war from the vanquished antagonists' viewpoints. Interestingly, the emergence of these memoirs occurred in what I call the post-Mahathir era, when media censorship on communism has relaxed somewhat with the retirement of the former authoritarian leader.

This emerging genre of MCP-related literature reveals divergent expectations about colonialism, nationalism, and identity from the 'other' side. With peace achieved following the tripartite 1989 Haadyai Peace Agreement between the Party and both the Malaysian and Thai governments that ended the half-century low intensity conflict in Peninsular Malaysia, the demobilized and retired communists began to record their experiences as part of an effort to commemorate their life journeys. The impetus to commit their memories to paper was voluntary and intensely personal. During my short visit to the Peace Village in Betong, I was told the publishing exercise was an "unexpected opportunity" to leave a literary 'footprint' of their exploits. In more ways than one, these retirees does not wish to see their lives as irrelevant. The writings, expectedly, discloses the idealism that drove the retirees to take up arms in the first place. Health issues and impending mortality brought upon by the onset of peace has spurred their desperate need to produce artefacts containing their legacies. The memoir productions and subsequent publications are not a concerted effort, but it is, without a doubt, an attempt at agency. The memories contained within the pages are piecemeal if consumed individually. But when taken together, they form a larger mural, or memory mosaic of collective remembrance. The collective memory that is constructed from their writings does not merely focus on the authors' socialist convictions; rather, it is also an expression of their individual hopes and understandings about what Malaya's independence was *supposed* to be and what that lost future meant to them. By chronicling their memories, these retirees sought to reconstruct the past by forwarding their arguments over national liberation and Malayan independence as they understood it. It is circumstantial that almost all these memoirs were written in Mandarin Chinese, which limits their impact to the ethnic Chinese community of Malaysia and abroad. There were very few memoirs that has an English edition. The

rare exceptions were occasionally independent publications such as Lin Yan's semi-autobiographical *Rainbow* which was translated into English by the author himself (Lin, 2013). One reason for the use of Mandarin was due to the writers' Chinese ethnicity and their educational background. Very few of the comrades were educated in English or were proficient enough to produce writings in English. Lin Yan was the exception rather than the rule because he only became English proficient following his migration to Australia in 2001 (Lin, 2013). Unable to express themselves fluently in other languages, the Chinese-educated writers relied on their mother tongue to articulate their thoughts. For this article, I have chosen two *untranslated* (emphasis mine) memoirs to remain close to the primary sources as possible to avoid the pitfalls of poor or mistranslations.

These memoirs raise interesting questions regarding Malaysia's current master narrative, which excised the MCP's role in the struggle for national independence. According to contemporary Malaysian history and historiography, the Party and its ideology were incompatible with the conservative Malayan culture and society and remains a threat to the fragile ethnic social and economic balance. That is why the Cold War domino that is Malaya never fell to communism. The authors of these memoirs also hoped to 'rectify' the gross injustice they felt was unfairly applied to them and their comrades due to their opposing ideological beliefs. The only way for them to do so was by firmly asserting their nationalist credentials in the memoirs. Consequently, the story of the struggle for Malaya during the Cold War could finally be told from the 'other' side, thus making the memoirs of these former communist insurgents an important contribution to filling in the missing gaps within Malayan/Malaysian historiography. Their narrative is one of the few original Malayan narratives of the insurgency that does not derive from colonial sources, nor was it influenced by the dominant national narrative. The best way to see this is through a quick glimpse on the two memoirs I have chosen to illustrate this point.

Zhang Zuo's Story

Zhang Zuo (张佐), the Party name of Zhang Tian Dai (张天带), was a former commander of a guerrilla team that actively operated in the Malay Peninsula's central region between 1971 and 1987. His memoir is presented as a veritable didactic text that seeks to justify to readers on the political and social criticality of the MCP's insurrection by using his life journey to reflect on the injustices inflicted upon the lower classes of colonial Malayan society.

Zhang's memoir exudes three abstract personas: the 'self' as an observer, the 'teacher' to provide political commentary, and the 'participant' as a historical actor. These personas are interchangeably employed without regard to the chronological era being presented and are not arranged in any order. Like most memoirs which began with the author's childhood, the 'participant' persona leads the narrative, but would abruptly give way to the 'teacher' and 'self' without notice. This writing mechanism can be confusing for the unwary, yet it reveals his intimate musings. The meat of the memoir is concentrated on the Malayan Emergency since

this is the period when he was most actively involved in the armed struggle from the deep jungles.

When writing as the 'self', Zhang constantly detaches himself from the narrative and instead provides descriptions of events that he witnessed or heard about. This literary strategy is often repeated in the memoir through anecdotal accounts. The earnest, but occasionally exasperated, tone and manner Zhang employed in the writing highlights the deeds of his comrades, raising them to dramatic heights at times. His purpose was to emphasize his fellow comrades' nationalist credentials by situating their actions historically, arguing that these martyrs (烈士) were true Malayan patriots deserving of recognition. For example, when recalling the incident of two female comrades who were killed trying to warn the guerrillas of an ambush, Zhang has this to say:

> "Fudi was only nineteen years old while Xiuying was seventeen or eighteen. They are daughters of ordinary families and laborers with only primary school education. They did not understand what communism is, but they clearly understood this: national liberation is patriotic, it is for the nation's independence, and it is the hero who fights for the people to stand up. They deserve to be respected and cherished because they sacrificed everything to save their comrades.
>
> Fudi and Xiuying's death had written a magnificent poem for our nation's independence. They are the pride of our nation's women! They had lived a great life but died gloriously!" (Zhang, 2005, p. 299 [Translation by author]).

The author expressed sorrow at the untimely deaths of the two youths, but the sadness is quickly replaced with more revolutionary rhetoric that lauded their sacrifice as an illustrious event. Zhang did this to argue that the armed struggle was a terrible conflict that had consumed the blood of Malaya's youth. He blames the British for prosecuting the war, justifying the Party's anti-colonial cause as morally just and righteous. He did this by inserting himself into the narrative as the 'participant', therefore asserting his place as a witness to the unfolding historical events.

The second core element of Zhang's memoir is his didactic interjections. A common theme present in the memoir is that imperialism was to blame for the Malayan people's sufferings. According to Zhang, World War II was caused by tensions driven by free market capitalism and it was the same ideology that powered colonialism. The global destruction and suffering brought by the war did nothing to liberate the people of the world except to restore colonial regimes that had been interrupted by fascist attacks. On the restoration of colonial rule in Malaya, Zhang asserts that:

> "In general, the main contradictions in the world after the war are: one, US-Soviet hegemonic struggle; two, imperialist nations of Britain, France, Netherlands, Belgium, Portugal, and others that were devastated by Fascist Germany, with the support of US imperialists, vainly attempts to restore colonial rule which has led to contradictions in the independence struggles of the colonies and semi-colonized people. These imperialist nations do not wish to return to the days under the painful yoke of the evil Hitler. But now, they want to apply the same pain on their previously colonized people, all for the sake of their own prosperity. This is their most shameful side.
>
> Our people faced similar situation back then. The anti-fascist war is over; peace has been restored in the nation. But the British colonialists never gave up on restoring colonial rule. Therefore, their basic policy is thus: do everything they can to attack our people's patriotic progressive power to consolidate their colonial regime, so furthering their objective of stealing our nation's resources. The Malayan Communist Party bears the brunt of the attack." (Zhang, 2005, p. 258 [Translation by author]).

Within that argument, Zhang describes MCP members as victims of imperialist machinations, stressing that it was their nationalist creed, not socialism, that threatened colonial rule. His 'teacher' didactic persona surfaced several times throughout the memoir whenever he felt some justifications is needed, often to inject additional moral and historical credibility propagandized by him and his fellow comrades' belief in the Party as a force of national liberation.This pedagogical identity can be quite heavy handed at times; he constantly reminds the reader of the ironic contradiction of morality and humanism promoted by the imperialists. This juxtaposed argument elevates Zhang from a mere line guerrilla fighter to a thinker who had never betrayed his convictions.

The last core element of Zhang's memoir is a narrative in which his 'self' transitions to the 'teacher' and the 'participant' seamlessly to suit the narrative. Zhang as the 'participant' is often relegated to the background, with the collective 'we' (我们) taking precedence in many events. The pronoun 'I' (我) appears only when he needs to delineate his personal actions from the Party's collective activities. Yet, Zhang makes it clear that his every action reflects the Party, and when he acts, he acts as part of the movement and for the movement. An example of this can be seen from an incident in which he and several comrades were under attack:

> "When the four enemy planes strafed and bombarded us in turn, the five or six bodyguards and two other comrades have already hidden themselves in the tall grass outside the house. The remaining four or five of us (including Chin Peng) were laying prostrate on the floor in the house while the planes attacked. Chin Peng then said with a laugh: 'Comrades, we are now at the mercy of heaven!' At his words, we looked at each other and smiled.

> But I had a sudden thought: 'Isn't the house the target?' Staying there is therefore dangerous. Hence, I called out: 'Comrades, let's charge out of the house!' The few of us did so together and hid with the other comrades in the tall grass. The enemy planes were still circling above and attacking. Unfortunately, the tall grass could only offer partial cover and there were no tall trees nearby to offer protection from bullets. Luckily, there was a burnt, fallen tree log among the grass. We moved there quickly to avoid being shot at. After half an hour of bombing and strafing, the enemy planes finally left." (Zhang, 2005, p. 265 [Translation by author]).

Zhang's humble deference to the collective "we" is a common theme in his memoir; he claims credit only when it is appropriate to do so. It also reveals his inseparable connection to the Party in which the 'self' is treated as a subset of the collective, making his individuality frustratingly elusive in the narrative. At times, his voice is inseparable from the collective voice. Readers may find it difficult to reconcile if he had been witnessing the events described or had he excised his culpability in it. Zhang seems consciously aware of this, but he is content to let the ever shifting 'self'-'teacher'-'participant' dynamic to define him. In doing so, he may have been trying to reaffirm his nationalist creed but at the same time downplaying his role in the violence he had been a part of.

Zhang Zuo completed his memoir from Pudu Jail and his anxiety is evident as he gradually expresses regret over the hardships his and the MCP's activities had inflicted on the people. However, he does not subscribe to the cliché of apologizing for past misdeeds. Instead, he argues that everything he did was in the name of Malayan nationalism and independence. Zhang may be an unapologetic Malayan communist, but what the reader could gain from his memoir are the unseen eyewitness accounts of historical events by those who fought and lost on the opposing side. In effect, Zhang's memoir projected a fresh view of the MCP insurgency by drawing attention to individuals who fought for the 'enemy' side.

Memoir writing is an attempt by authors to stake out personal history within the contention of history. Like other autobiographical authors, Zhang Zuo made use of this literary mechanics to reemphasize a particular world view and interpret that history according to his understanding. Frustratingly, Zhang would refuse to present his life story coherently, preferring to digress into anecdotes and political commentaries that may have done his memoir a disservice. What he does not explicitly state about the insurgency may be often hidden within his seemingly tangential musings. This allows Zhang to tell his story under his own terms.

Yi Chuan's Story

Yi Chuan was born He Chaosi (何潮思) and, unlike Zhang Zuo who was born in China, was a Malayan-born Chinese. His memoir consisted of two parts. The first focuses on his experiences growing up seeing the Malayan Communist Party defending and liberating the

people of his hometown of Merapoh during the closing weeks of the Japanese Occupation in World War II. The event deeply impressed him to join the guerrillas during the Malayan Emergency. The second part details his work in educating and recruiting the native tribal people of the jungles known as the *Orang Asal* (meaning "Original People," the MCP-preferred term for the tribal native people living in the deep jungles of Malaya/Malaysia), which he held in great respect. The former recreates the circumstances around his upbringing that led to his anti-colonial attitude; the latter details his interaction and observation of the tribal folk and his subsequent argument for the need to recognize their sacrifices.

Similar to Zhang Zuo, Yi Chuan's early "self" is established as an impressionable but self-proclaimed patriotic Malayan who witnessed the effects of Japanese and British imperialism first-hand. Of the Japanese invaders, Yi Chuan recalled an incident in which he witnessed their cruelty:

> "I stood in front of the (police) station entrance and saw them interrogate the injured Malay man all night. Do you know how they interrogated him? They stripped the 'prisoner' naked, pushed him to the ground, forced fed him water, and then placed an 80 lbs piece of wood from the railroad tracks on top of him. Two men sat on top of the wood and the 'prisoner' would vomit water and pass out. This was done repeatedly, torturing that Malay man to an inch of his life. This went on for at least 3 hours. In the end, they dragged him to jail." (Yi Chuan, 2012, p. 17 [Translation by author]).

This left an enduring mark on Yi Chuan, who claimed he became convinced that the only way to free the oppressed people of Malaya was to stand firm and resist imperialism. At this juncture, Yi Chuan projected himself as another powerless victim of imperialism. What he witnessed, he claims, galvanized his decision to fight. Indeed, he proceed to project himself as a revolutionary when he detailed the many atrocities committed by colonial regimes of both the British and the Japanese. His narrative is functionally less didactic than Zhang Zuo's and features more first-hand accounts of his life in the armed struggle. More specifically, his narrative speaks glowingly about the cooperation between the guerrilla army and the *Orang Asal*, often crediting the latter for their continual support. Most importantly, Yi Chuan's recollections reconstructed the little-known story of the critical role the often-neglected tribal folk played in the armed struggle.

In essence, the centrality of Yi Chuan's memoir revolves around his work with the *Orang Asal* tribes. Describing them as semi-primitive and innocent but earnest in supporting the Party, Yi Chuan accords them considerable respect for instructing the guerrillas on jungle survival methods and for volunteering to join the revolution. In Yi Chuan's view, these tribal people are the quintessential masses that is suffering from the binary of racial discrimination and neglect by the British imperialists. Moreover, Yi Chuan repeatedly highlights the kindness and respect the Party and the guerrillas accorded to them. For example:

> "After much research and discussions, it is decided to address them as 'Ah Sha' (阿沙; Mandarin translation of *Asal*, meaning the original), using two syllables as standard. This meant we recognize these hill tribes as Malaya's original people. It should be said our Party and army were the first to confirm this and gave them the name of 'Ah Sha'." (Yi Chuan, 2012, p. 92 [Translation by author]).

The Ah Sha, as the *Orang Asal* are called in Mandarin Chinese, were portrayed as the guerrillas' dearest family members who were described by Yi Chuan as selfless and kind-hearted and often provided food for the starving revolutionaries and even cared for the guerrilla's sick and wounded. But to Yi Chuan, the Ah Sha's greatest virtue was their communal spirit, which he described as ideal:

> "In those days, the Ah Sha led a primitive, semi-primitive existence, sharing everything, including food. Even if they are consuming a monkey, everything from its head to the toe as well as its intestines were divided in detail and equally. One could even get a piece of monkey liver the size of a thumb. Adults and children did the same and it became a tradition. Learning to be selfless is good... Helping one another during difficulties is good. If your cassava field was destroyed by wild animals and your tribe is starving, you can come to my place to eat. If my place has famine, then I would go to yours to eat." (Yi Chuan, 2012, p. 95 [Translation by author]).

Yi Chuan is clearly pleased with what he saw in the Ah Sha. He later narrated in great length the sacrifices of the Ah Sha male and female recruits in the guerrilla army. These descriptions projects Yi Chuan as a facilitator, and he was proud to have witnessed their contributions. This positions Yi Chuan as their advocate, reminding readers that the Ah Sha played an important supporting role in the Malayan communist revolution.

As one finishes the memoir it is implicitly clear that the MCP situated their armed struggle as a multi-ethnic effort carried out through mutual respect and cooperation between the guerrillas and the people. Yet, what is missing from the narratives are overt depictions of violent activities carried out by the guerrilla army, nor does the author linger on instances of gratuitous combat. What is presented to the readers are loving appreciations of jungle life and expressions of love for their homeland—Malaya. It must be noted that the people referred to in Yi Chuan's memoir meant the Ah Sha tribes which he claimed (some) supported the Party's vision for national liberation. Given the primitive development level of the tribes during that era, it is unclear if the concept of "nation" and "liberation" ever entered the tribal folk's consciousness. Yet Yi Chuan was utterly convinced that with the support of the aboriginal Malayan people, the revolution would one day succeed.

Jungle survival was an extremely arduous challenge faced by the mostly urbanised MCP cadre, and as a result these men and women found themselves wholly dependent on the jungle

tribes for survival. As seen from the MCP's literary choice of 'Ah Sha' when referring to the aboriginal folk, there are abundant respect reserved for the Ah Sha even to this day. If not for the continued support accorded by other, less treacherous, Ah Sha tribes, MCP guerrillas such as Yi Chuan might not even have anything positive to say about their experience post-1989, let alone surviving decades living amongst them. I must also point out an idiosyncratic point within the memoir: the contacts between the MCP guerrillas and the tribes were described as nearly always positive. Nonetheless, it is not far-fetched to imagine some form of coercion, gentle or otherwise, might have been employed to some degree by the guerrillas to gain supplies, intelligence, and support. Yi Chuan, naturally, did not mention any of this whatsoever.

Despite the unique exposition of the MCP guerrillas' relationship with the Ah Sha through the experience of one of its active facilitators, Yi Chuan's narrative remains incomplete, full of chronological gaps and omissions. Whether those omissions were deliberate or not remains unclear to this day as the author opt to focus on his work with the Ah Sha predominantly in his narrative. Nevertheless, it is interesting to see parallelism between how the British views the *Orang Asal* (which they refer to as *Orang Asli*) versus Yi Chuan's insistence that the Party were the first to acknowledge their aboriginal status. As seen in John Leary's paper on the *Orang Asli*, the British relied on the cooperation of friendly tribes in their hunts for the guerrillas with satisfactory results (Leary 1989). While the British did not depend on the tribes to resupply or for jungle survival, the tribal folk were essentially treated the same way as the MCP did: making use of their natural ability to operate in the jungles. Moreover, both the British and the MCP patronized the *Orang Asli/Orang Asal* which can be demeaning at times. But this argument is beyond the scope of this article.

Conclusion

Through the eyes of these two authors, we can see that the Malayan communist armed struggle is far from a simple insurgency bereft of personality and human experiences. The actors in the conflict were driven and motivated by different personal catalysts, shaped by the harsh life experiences they experienced. These experiences led, not drove, them to join the communist guerrilla army. The different "selves" invoked by the authors are poorly defined but instead emerge as constantly shifting personas that morph from one to another at will to suit the narrative. In other words, the "self" could speak for the collective while at the same time not lose its individual voice. For example, the experiences of interacting with the tribal *Orang Asal* helped shape Yi Chuan's identity from a mere communist revolutionary to a self-professed advocate of an oppressed minority. This in turn fuelled his sense of righteousness: the struggle is not merely to throw out the British, but it is also about giving credit to the marginalized people for their contribution to the anti-imperialist effort.

It must be noted that the life stories of Zhang Zuo and Yi Chuan sought to be easily consumed by the public. To that end the narratives tries to inject as much individuality and

humanity by focusing on their exploits as opposed to glorious accounts of bloody victories over their enemies. Try as they might, it remains a one-dimensional account for it did not include any descriptions of personal desires and of intimacy. Their individuality is easily overwhelmed by the Party and the Party's immediate needs. Their identity is in lockstep with the MCP and its ideology, and it can be a challenge to divorce the private individual from the committed communist guerrilla if the reader is careless in reading the memoirs. Therefore, these memoirs were both an inadvertent collective memory project for the retired Party members in addition to being a personal recollection of their triumphs and (to a limited degree) their failures in their lives as a revolutionary. Yet, this paper is by no means a comprehensive examination of the voices of "the other side" as it is but a case study using two retirees' memories. Such a project requires extensive effort and time to complete, and the fruit of the research would be a lengthy volume.

Now that these "silenced revolutionaries" have finally spoken up, the old master narrative authored by the British can no longer be the singular account of the Malayan communist insurgency. Although it may have taken decades for the retired communists to present their side of history, the fact they did so will, one hopes, engender a healthy discourse on the variegated impact of the communist insurgency on the history of Malaya/Malaysia's development as a nation.

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