

# **An Investigation into the Leadership, Ideology, and Organization of the Malayan Communist Movement, 1936-1941**

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Over the last twenty years, scholarly research into some aspects of the Malayan communist movement of pre-1942 era has yielded good results. Yoji Akashi's original and comprehensive study of Lai Teck will be much appreciated by students of Malaysian history.<sup>1</sup> Yeo Kim Wah's substantive article on the communist challenge in the Malayan labour scene, 1936-1937, will stand the test of time as a fine piece of scholarship on the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) leadership in labour unrest.<sup>2</sup> Stephen Leong has done some pioneer works on the pre-war communist movement generally and on the communist

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1. Yoji Akashi, "Lai Teck, Secretary General of the Malayan Communist Party, 1939-1947," *Journal of South Seas Society*, 49 (1994), pp. 57-103.
2. Yeo Kim Wah, "The Communist Challenge in the Malayan Labour Scene, September 1936-March 1937," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 49, Pt. II (1976), pp. 36-79.

united front movement, 1937-1941, in particular.<sup>3</sup> Cheah Boon Kheng's recent contribution lies both in his compilation of a substantive volume of important primary sources for the study of the Malayan communist movement and in his 40-page introduction to it.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the above, there remain some themes, such as the MCP leadership, ideology, and organization during the 1936-1941 era, which are yet to be more fully explored, analyzed, and documented. In the process of my own research through the collection of primary sources hitherto unused in public by other scholars<sup>5</sup> and through interviews and correspondence with some of the participants in the pre-war Malayan communist movement now living in the People's Republic of China and Hong Kong,<sup>6</sup> it is hoped that new light can be shed on these aspects mentioned. It will be argued that despite considerable losses in party leaders during this period under investigation due to persistent colonial repression, the party had deepened its power base in trade unions and in the popular National Salvation movement. In other words, it was largely the ideological appeal of anti-Japanese nationalism and the MCP's organizational strengths which helped broaden its mass support from 1936.

The Malayan communist movement of 1930-5 was severely mauled by in-

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3. Stephen Leong, "Sources, Agencies, and Manifestations of Overseas Chinese Nationalism in Malaya, 1937-1941," Ph. D. Dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1976, Vol. 1, pp. 222-47; Vol. 2, pp. 411-70, 608-38, and 685-99.  
 \_\_\_\_\_, "The Kuomintang-Communist United Front in Malaya during the National Salvation Period, 1937-1941," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 8, 1 (March 1977), pp. 31-47.  
 \_\_\_\_\_, "The Malayan Overseas Chinese and the Sino-Japanese War, 1937-1941," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 10, 2 (September 1979), pp. 293-320.
  4. Cheah Boon Kheng (ed.), *From PKI to the Comintern, 1924-1941: The Apprenticeship of the Malayan Communist Party* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Southeast Asian Program, 1992), 143 pp. For the introduction, see pp. 3-42.
  5. Three important primary sources which are yet to be used by other scholars include:  
 (1) *Malaiya geming ziliao fubian diyi ji* (马来亚革命资料附编第一辑) (Beijing, 1953), 140 pp. There are a number of MCP documents which have not been included in Cheah Boon Kheng's edition. This 1953 documentary volume was kindly provided to me by Chen Ligui (陈立贵), formerly of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing.  
 (2) 7F 74, Surete Generale, Indochinoise Series, see Supplement No. 1 of 1939 to the Straits Settlements Police Special Branch Political Intelligence Journals, kindly provided to me by Associate Professor Yeo Kim Wah of the National University of Singapore. This document is invaluable in the study of MCP leaders during the 1936-1939 period.  
 (3) CO 537/3753, Pt. III, Malaya: Political Developments, Political Intelligence Journals, 1948, see Supplement No. 8 to Political Intelligence Journal, Serial 14 (31 July 1948), "The Wright (Lye Teck) Document," pp. 40-6.

ternal dissension and relentlessly battered by government repression and nearly proved unsustainable. However, 1936 saw the turning of the tide and the beginning of the revival of its political fortunes. Why was 1936 such an important turning point in the Malayan communist movement, a year which saw the transformation of a party, low in morale and short of funds, to one which was to become capable of challenging the British colonial rule? What made it possible for such a reversal of political fortunes? The answer lies in three vital moves made by the MCP from 1934 in response to changing sociopolitical conditions prevailing in the world and in Malaya.

In response to improved economic conditions in Malaya in 1936, the MCP, which had embarked on organizing labour in key industries in Malaya since 1934, launched a series of strikes for better working conditions from September 1936.<sup>7</sup> The leadership provided by the MCP won the party new membership and enhanced its prestige and influence within the working class in Malaya. This bold strategy of organizing and mobilizing labour paid off handsomely for the party at a time when it was low in morale and confidence.

A second strategic move came in September that year at the fifth enlarged plenum of the central committee in Johor, when the party eventually ended the political and leadership domination of the Hainanese communists by electing a young Hokkien communist, Cai Baiyun (蔡白云), as the party secretary and Lai Teck (莱特 Lai Te) as his second-in-command, the deputy secretary (第二书记). Advertently or inadvertently, this move had great historical significance. It ush-

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6. My interviews in 1991 with former Malayan communist leaders of the pre-war era, resident in the People's Republic of China, included:

- (1) Li Qixin (李启新), MCP propaganda head (1932-1933) and party secretary (1934).
- (2) Peng Guanghan (彭光涵), formerly Peng Haihan (彭海涵), student activist and Anti-enemy Backing-up Society (AEBUS) (抗敌后援会) leader for Malaya until his deportation to China in 1940.
- (3) Chen Qingshan (陈青山), AEBUS leader in Penang; Malayan General Labour Union (MGLU) leader in Singapore in 1939-1940; one of the organizers of the May Day Procession in 1940; arrested by the British in May 1940 and deported to China in December that year.
- (4) Fu Rongding (符荣鼎), a veteran communist leader in Malaya; succeeded Fu Daqing (傅大庆) as party propaganda head from June 1931; organizer of the Second Party Representative Conference in Kluang, Johor, in 1932; arrested in 1932 and imprisoned for three years before being banished to China in 1935.
- (5) Zeng Ding (曾定), a veteran Cantonese communist activist in Perak of the 1930s and 1940s.

Besides, my correspondence with Wee Mon Cheng (黄望青 Huang Wangqing), formerly Ng Yeh Lu (黄耶鲁 Huang Yelu), has produced considerable information on his early career as a leading member of the AEBUS leadership and on his association with Lai Teck as well as his betrayal by Lai Teck to the Japanese in April 1942 in Singapore.

7. See Yeo Kim Wah, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-79.

ered in a new era in which the Malayan communist movement was seen to have transcended the line of dialect groupings to become a Chinese intellectual and working-class movement. The new leadership was quick to reassure the participants at the fifth enlarged party plenum that it would endeavour to make the party leadership a multiracial one.<sup>8</sup>

A third tactical move which took place also at the party plenum in September 1936 was the party's endorsement of the directive of the Comintern to form a united front movement with non-communists against Japanese expansion in China.<sup>9</sup> For the first time, the MCP provided leadership to this united front movement, known as the Overseas Chinese Anti-Japanese National Salvation Union (华侨抗日联合会). In October 1936, Chinese school teachers and students, together with workers and shop assistants, convened a meeting in Singapore with a view to forming such a union. However, it was not until February 1937 that the Singapore Overseas Chinese Anti-Japanese National Salvation Union (新加坡华侨抗日联合会) was officially founded.<sup>10</sup> It took the MCP another couple of months in 1937 to found the All-Malaya Overseas Chinese Anti-Japanese National Salvation Union (马来亚华侨抗日联合会). The formation of such a united front organization comprising all dialect groups and all social strata of the Malayan Chinese community for a common cause proved to be successful and popular. As a result, the MCP broadened its mass base. After the official outbreak of hostility in July 1937 between China and Japan, these national salvation unions were again transformed into the various Overseas Chinese Anti-enemy Backing-up Societies (AEBUS 抗敌后援会) as the united front organizations of the MCP, a front which sapped much of the resources and energy of the British authorities in the pre-war years.

## Party Leadership

Before the fifth enlarged plenum of the central committee in September 1936 in Johor, the MCP and its two front organizations, Malayan Communist Youth League (MCYL) and Malayan General Labour Union (MGLU), found it difficult

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8. CO 273/630/50147/1, Police Annual Report, 1936, see "Review of Communist Activities in Malaya, 1936," pp. 1-2.
  9. *Ibid.* See also G. Z. Hanrahan, *The Communist Struggle in Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1971), reprint, pp. 48-9
  10. Chen Ligui, "A Preliminary Study of Malayan Overseas Chinese All-Circles Anti-enemy Backing-up Society," *Southern Asian Studies*, Complimentary Number (1989), p. 54.

to provide trained personnel to man all the organizations, due in part to mass arrests and deportations by the colonial government as well as internal dissension. As a result, a combined MCP central committee was formed to direct the affairs and activities of the three separate organizations.<sup>11</sup> This combined central committee consisted of members resident both in Singapore and in Malaya. Quite apart from conducting affairs in their own areas, the Malayan members of the central committee served as channels through which the directions of the Singapore members reached the state and town committees. It remains, however, unclear whether the new central committee elected at the fifth enlarged plenum of the central committee was empowered to direct the affairs of its front organizations mentioned.

Although there is yet no documentation as to the size of the central committee, sources available show that at least ten members can be identified, as shown in Table 1.

Among these ten central committee members so far identified, Cai Baiyun deserves some analysis. He was born in Singapore in 1913 and received a university education in Shanghai. He was a Hokkien from a merchant family; his father was born in Quemoy, off the coast of Fujian province. Reported to have returned to Singapore in 1934, he became party secretary in September 1936 but was arrested in January 1937 for his anti-Japanese activism. Banished to China after a six-month imprisonment, Cai made his way to Yenan to join the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), resisting the Japanese invasion. In 1939, he left for Cambodia, working in Phnom Penh as a secondary-school teacher. In December 1940, he joined the CCP's South China Bureau (华南局) to promote communism in South China. However, after Hong Kong was occupied by Japan, he returned to Cambodia in 1943 to continue his anti-Japanese activities among the Chinese there. He died in 1946 in Saigon of tuberculosis.<sup>12</sup> Lai Teck, the deputy secretary, then already a British agent, was so damaging to the Malayan communist movement up to 1947 that he will be analyzed more fully later. Yang Shaomin (杨少民), a veteran Hainanese communist from Penang, became party secretary, succeeding Cai in February 1937. He proved to be a seasoned and dedicated party leader for he was re-elected as a central committee member at the sixth enlarged plenum of the central committee in Singapore in April 1939. He was also elected the propaganda head of the party and remained so until his arrest by the

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11. CO 273/630/50147/1, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

12. Zhou Nanjing (周南京) (ed.), *Dictionary of Overseas Chinese* (世界华侨华人词典) (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 1933), p. 851.

**Table 1: MCP's Central Committee Members, September 1936**

Name	Key Positions Held
1. Cai Baiyun (蔡白云) alias Cai Changqing (蔡长青)	Party Secretary from September 1936 to January 1937; Singapore-born Hokkien of Quemoy origin.
2. Lai Teck (莱特 Lai Te)	Deputy Secretary; a British agent from 1934 and a central committee member from May 1935.
3. Huang Cheng (黄诚), aliases A Wong (亚黄 Ya Huang), Huang Shi (黄石)	Chairman, central committee; member, political bureau. Born in Putian (莆田), Fujian.
4. Yang Shaomin (杨少民) alias Xiaomin (小民)	Hainanese communist from Penang; successor to Cai and member of the party's political bureau.
5. Ng A Hui (黄亚辉 Huang Yahui)	Member, political bureau; arrested and banished in May 1937.
6. Zhang Li (张理), alias A Keng (亚硬 Ya Ying)	Hainanese; Penang CP chairman; member, organizational bureau and chairman of MCP's Northern Region, Malaya.
7. Toa Beng (大明 Da Ming)	Member, organizational bureau; chairman of MCP's South Region in Malaya, January-May 1937; chairman, MGLU standing committee.
8. Chiu Tong (周唐 Zhou Tang)	Member, organizational bureau; chairman, Building Workers' Labour Union, January-April 1937; vice chairman, Selangor CP State Committee, January-April 1937; arrested and banished in 1937. Born in Guangzhou in 1905.
9. Heng I Cheng (邢贻精 Xing Yijing)	Member, organizational bureau; chairman, Negeri Sembilan CP State Committee, January-March 1937; arrested and banished in 1937; a Hainanese communist leader.
10. Chan Han (陈汉 Chen Han) alias Chen Shi	Member, organizational bureau; chairman, Selangor CP State Committee, January-April 1937; MGLU standing committee member; arrested and banished in 1937. Born in Hainan in 1911.

*Sources:* (1) 7F 74, Surete Generale Indochinoise Series, see Supplement No.1 of 1939 to the Straits Settlements Police Special Branch Political Intelligence Journal, under Names Index, p. ii. (2) Ching Lang, *Weizhuang bixu boqu* (伪装必须剥去) (Macao, 1987), p. 4. (3) Information on Chan Han has been kindly provided by Ma Lin (马林), a historian on the Malayan communist movement, now living in Guangzhou, and Chen Qingshan (陈青山), himself a former Malayan communist activist during the 1930s, now living in Guangzhou.

British in 1940.<sup>13</sup> His China career after deportation in September 1940 has remained a blank. Zhang Li (张理), another Hainanese communist leader from Penang, was prominent in his role as a labour organizer. It is probable that he was arrested in 1938, since he was not re-elected at the sixth enlarged party plenum in April 1939. Chan Han (陈汉 Chen Han) was one of the masterminds behind the 1937 Batu Arang coalminers' strike involving some 5,000 coalminers. He was banished in 1937; no further news was heard of him until he died in Guangzhou in 1990. Chiu Tong (周唐 Zhou Tang) was active in organizing Chinese rubber tappers for strikes in 1936 and 1937 but was arrested in late April 1937 and deported to China in December 1937. The others in Table 1 have remained underdocumented, apart from the information provided by the Special Branch briefly listed under "Key Positions Held."

What general observations may be derived from Table 1? First, the Hainanese domination within the party hierarchy had ended, although they still played prominent roles. This could also be said about their reduced role in front organizations of the MCP, judging by the fact that many of the strikes from September 1936 involved few Hainanese workers. Second, the election of a Singapore-born Hokkien into the position of party secretary signalled the beginning of the inevitable demographic trend that more Malaya-born Chinese from all dialect groups were to dominate the movement vis-a-vis the China-born leadership. Third, with the exception of Sutan Jenain who had been a central committee member in 1935 and 1936, there were no other non-Chinese being elected into the MCP hierarchy from September 1936 onwards, a divergence from the party's avowed policy of making the Malayan communist movement a truly multiracial one. Finally, with the exception of Lai Teck, who was born in Annam in 1900, the central committee members were young in age. A contemporary Japanese source estimated that the average age of the central committee and its standing committee members in 1937 was 26.<sup>14</sup>

In response to the series of strikes unleashed by the MCP and its industrial arm, the MGLU, and aided by intelligence information provided by Lai Teck to the British,<sup>15</sup> the Special Branch moved in to round up some 20 top communist labour

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13. Xinma qiaoyu hui (新马侨友会) (ed.), *Malaiya renmin kangri douzheng shiliao xuanji* (马来亚人民抗日斗争史料选辑) (Hong Kong: The Witness Publishing Company, 1992), pp. 180, 182-3.

14. Hanrahan, *op. cit.*, p. 59, quoted from C. Tsutsui, *Nampo gunsei-ron* (Tokyo, 1944), pp. 153-4.

15. Anthony Short, *The Communist Insurrection in Malaya, 1948-60* (London: Frederick Muller, 1975), p. 39.

leaders and 13 central committee members during 1937, making it one of the largest hauls in the pre-war years. These leaders, after detention, were all deported back to China.<sup>16</sup> However, the mass arrest and deportation this time did not unduly deter the Malayan communist movement since it had established mass bases in trade union organizations and various anti-Japanese national salvation unions. Unlike the grim era of 1930-5 when trained personnel, once detained and deported, could not be replaced, the MCP in the post-1935 era was able to soldier on by drawing on the enlarged membership to replenish the losses incurred through repressive government measures.

By April 1939 when the sixth enlarged plenum of the central committee was convened in Singapore a new central committee of 13 and two supernumerary members were elected. The 13 central committee members were to man three vital committees, namely, a standing committee of seven members, a central political bureau of three members, and an organization department of four members. Lai Teck, then the party secretary-general, was on both the standing committee and the political bureau. The central committee was to meet quarterly, and the other two committees weekly.<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, there is no documentary evidence to identify those on the three committees mentioned. The leadership structure of the MCP at the highest level remained largely unchanged up to the eve of the Japanese invasion of Malaya in December 1941. Table 2 lists the names of the 13 central committee members and one known reserve only; and a brief dossier is provided on the career of each of them.

The last central committee of the pre-war years was elected at the seventh enlarged plenum of the central committee in Singapore in July 1941. When comparing the 1939 and the 1941 lists of central committee membership, it is surprising to find that it remained largely intact with only three changes with Cai Keming (蔡克明), Lin Wangsheng (林旺生) alias Xiaoping (小平), and Zhang Kezhang (张克章) replacing the banished Yang Shaomin, Ah Li (亚利 Ya Li), and Zhang Jinzhang (张锦章). It is thus pertinent to combine these two lists of membership for discussion with a view to highlighting the characteristics of the MCP leadership at the highest level.

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16. CO 275/149, R. Onraet, "Annual Report on the Organization and Administration of the SS Police and on the State of Crime," *Annual Departmental Report of the SS for 1937*, Singapore, 1939, Vol. 2, p. 836.

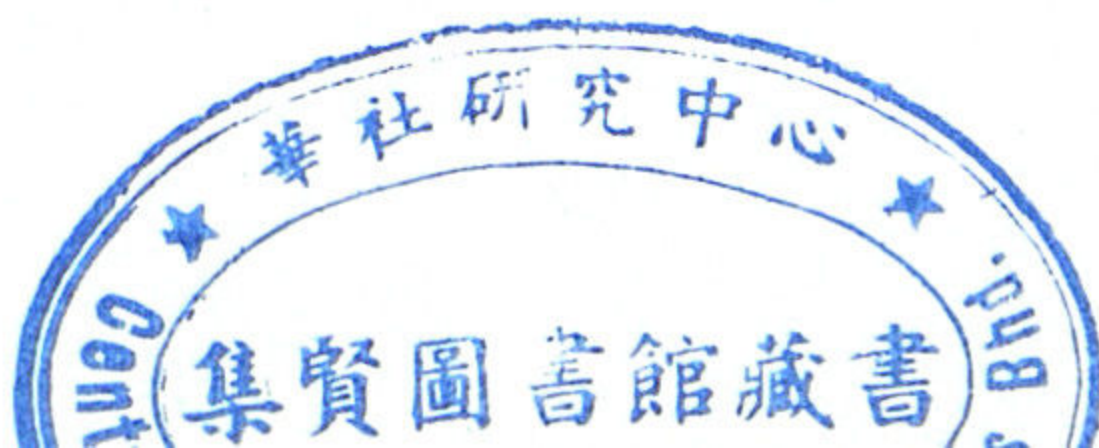
17. 7F 74, *op. cit.*, see Supplement No. 1 of 1939 to the SS Police Special Branch Political Intelligence Journals, p. 2.



**Table 2: MCP'S Central Committee Members, April 1939**

Name	Career in Brief
1. Lai Teck (莱特 Lai Te)	Party Secretary and British agent; commonly known to his colleagues as Malaya's Lenin.
2. Huang Cheng (黄诚) alias Huang Shi (黄石)	Organizational head; born in Putian, Fujian; had been a Chinese school teacher and newspaper editor in Ipoh; an intellectual.
3. Yang Shaomin (杨少民)	Propaganda head; arrested in 1940 and banished to China in September 1940; replaced by Cai Keming in 1941.
4. Zheng Shenglie (郑声烈) alias Ah Ling (亚宁 Ya Ning)	Born in Muar, Johor, of Hokkien parents of Yongchun (永春) origin; a graduate of Chung Ling High School (钟灵中学) in Penang; an intellectual.
5. Li Zhenzhong (李振忠) alias Siau Chung (小忠 Xiao Zhong)	Born in Anxi (安溪) district, Fujian, but came to live with his parents in Malaya at the age of seven; educated first in Penang and then in Singapore Chinese high school; father was a tea merchant.
6. Huang Bosui (黄伯遂) alias Lin Jiangshi (林江石)	Born in Zengcheng (增城), Guangdong; from a working-class background.
7. Li Liang (李良) alias Pai Yi (白衣)	A Cantonese builder by trade; party secretary of the Kuala Lumpur branch of the MCP in 1939.
8. Zhu Riguang (朱日光) alias Zhu Lao (朱佬)	A veteran Hainanese communist leader from the FMS; killed by the Japanese in the "Batu Caves Incident" on 1 September 1942.
9. Ah Li (亚利 Ya Li) alias Qiang Li (强利)	His family name and dialect group origin unknown; arrested in 1940 in Singapore and probably banished in September 1940; replaced by Lin Wansheng in 1941.
10. Zhong Buqing (鍾步青) alias Liu Wen (刘文)	Born in Johor in 1920; a Cantonese intellectual.
11. Chen Peiqing (陈培青) alias Xiaolu (小路)	A Teochew or Hokkien intellectual.
12. Qiu Lianjie (邱联杰) alias Ah Chiu (阿邱 Ya Qiu)	Probably a Teochew communist leader.
13. Zhang Jinzhang (张锦章) (reserve member)	Dialect group origin unknown; replaced by Zhang Kezhang in 1941.
14. Wu Tian (吴田) alias Ah Chung (亚仲 Ya Zhong)	Born in Hainan; representing the East Pahang MCP on the central committee.

*Source: The above list was kindly provided by Zeng Ding (曾定), a veteran Cantonese communist activist of the 1930s and 1940s, now living in retirement in Guangzhou.*



Of the 17 central committee members from the two lists, Huang Chen (黄诚) was an intellectual of high calibre, greatly cultured, possessing intense political consciousness and an analytical mind. One of his contemporaries, Wee Mon Cheng, known in the 1930s as Ng Yeh Lu, knew him as a modest, friendly, considerate, and steady person, whose enormous talent and ability would have made him a first-class revolutionary.<sup>18</sup> He was betrayed by Lai Teck to the Japanese and tortured to death in prison in Singapore on 9 August 1942.<sup>19</sup> Zheng Shenglie (郑声烈), a young Muar-born communist active in anti-Japanese campaigns, was a gentle, diligent, and dedicated party leader who worked closely with Lai Teck.<sup>20</sup> However, he was also betrayed by Lai Teck and was executed by the Japanese in Singapore in 1944 at the age of 25. Li Zhenzhong (李振忠) was another Chinese-educated youngster, whose political career began after the Sino-Japanese war in 1937. At the age of 18 in 1938, he joined the MCP as a card-carrying member and was despatched to Penang to serve as secretary of the Penang town committee. In 1939, he was promoted to be secretary of the Singapore town committee, whose tasks entailed the mobilization of labour and students. He was closely involved in planning and operating the May Day demonstrations in Singapore in 1940 which involved the participation of about 50,000 workers. As the British were cracking down on the strike organizers, Li was transferred to Kuala Lumpur to carry out his communist activism. His fighting leadership quality earned him yet another promotion on 10 December 1941 to the party's standing committee to direct the Malayan communist movement at a critical time.<sup>21</sup> After Malaya had fallen to the invading Japanese, he was instrumental in convening a party conference of party cadres and military personnel at Batu Caves, Kuala Lumpur, on 1 September 1942. The party secretary Lai Teck tipped off the Japanese, who mobilized more than 2,000 troops with armoured vehicles and heavy weapons to encircle and exterminate the communist participants *en masse*. Overwhelmingly outnumbered and outgunned, the MCP lost 18 people, including Li Zhenzhong and Zhu Riguang (朱日光), members of the central committee.<sup>22</sup> The severed head of Zhu was reported to have been on display in the street of Kuala Lumpur after the Batu Caves Incident.<sup>23</sup>

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18. Wee Mon Cheng's letter to the author, dated 20 April 1993, p. 1.

19. Xinma qiaoyu hui (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 335.

20. Wee Mon Cheng's letter to the author, dated 20 April 1993, p. 1.

21. Xinma qiaoyu hui (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 284.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

Born in 1916, Huang Bosui (黄伯遂) migrated with his mother to Pusing, Perak, when young. After graduating from a local Chinese primary school, Huang worked in a Chinese tin-mining company and joined the MCP in 1937. He was so active in mobilizing Chinese tin miners for a strike in 1937 and in campaigning for a Japanese boycott that he was elected into the central committee in April 1939, representing the Perak Communist Party. He led the communist movement in Kuala Lumpur in 1939 and in Singapore in 1940, but was arrested and imprisoned by the British in 1941. Released on 20 December 1941, Huang was involved in organizing military training of Chinese voluntary forces against the invading Japanese in Singapore. Betrayed by Lai Teck, he was detained by the Japanese in April 1942. He died in prison on 18 July 1942 after being tortured.<sup>24</sup>

With the exception of Wu Tian (吴田) who was at large and Lai Teck who had become a Japanese agent after the fall of Singapore in February 1942, the rest of the central committee were systematically rounded up, imprisoned, tortured, and destroyed. These members included Chen Peiqing (陈培青), who died on 1 August 1942; Qiu Lianjie (邱联杰), on 1 August 1942; Li Liang (李良), in November 1942; Zhong Buqing (钟步青), in 1944; Zhang Jinzhang, in 1942; Cai Keming and Lin Wangsheng, both in 1943.<sup>25</sup> While the Japanese were responsible for the destruction of these central committee members, it was Lai Teck, then already a double-agent, who provided information about their whereabouts which led to their arrest and the inevitable destruction.

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24. *Ibid.*, pp. 298-9.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 335. See also Xinma qiaoyu hui (ed.), *Malaiya renmin kangri jun* (马来亚人民抗日军) (Hong Kong: The Witness Publishing Company, 1992), p. 138.

## The Role of Lai Teck in the Malayan Communist Movement, 1934-1941

Who was this Lai Teck, the arch “enemy within” (内奸), seemingly trading his colleagues off for power and his own skin?

Lai Teck was born in 1900 in Nghe Tinh, Annam, then under French control. His early life and career up to the time of his arrival in Singapore in 1934 have remained largely undocumented. In the course of his stormy career from 1934 to 1947, Lai Teck collected a host of aliases, including Wright, Light, Wong Sui Tong, Chang Hung, and Wong Kim Geok. He presented a variety of images at different times to those who came into contact with him. Wee Mon Cheng, a communist cadre in the latter part of the 1930s, who had known Lai Teck personally from December 1937, vividly describes him as a small, short person, no taller than five feet six, with a flat, thin but dark face, lips tightly closed, a pair of sharp and penetrating eyes, made more effective by sideways glances. According to Wee, “these are the features of a cruel, heartless, and dangerous man, like the treacherous villain in a Chinese opera.”<sup>26</sup> Lai Teck must have been a good actor, often giving Wee the impression that he was profound, unfathomable, mysterious, and reticent, not given to laughter and jokes. When they met, they never discussed personal or family matters except those related to politics, current affairs, and party strategies and tactics. However, his spoken Mandarin was far from perfect, and he was unable to communicate in Mandarin on complex political subjects and contents.<sup>27</sup> Wee was the first of Lai Teck’s colleagues to provide documentation about him in October 1945, unmasking Lai Teck and exposing him as being responsible for his own arrest by the Japanese and the death of many of the MCP leaders during the Japanese occupation of Malaya.<sup>28</sup> Chen Qingshan, a young student and labour activist during the latter part of the 1930s met Lai Teck personally on a number of occasions, confirming that Lai Teck could speak Mandarin but could not write it. Moreover, Lai Teck was fluent in French, for he took minutes in French. His other impressions were that Lai Teck was eloquent and had considerable grasp

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26. Wee Mon Cheng’s letter to the author, dated 18 September 1992, p. 1.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 2

28. Ye Lu (耶鲁), “Magong zhongyang zongshuji Lai Te ruhe shahai kuogong liang dang ji lian jun ganbu” (马共中央总书记莱特如何杀害国共两党及联军干部), *International Times* (国际时报), 97 (August 1968), pp. 20-4.

of communist theory. As a result of this, Lai Teck was worshipped by the party's rank and file as "Malaya's Lenin."<sup>29</sup> Richard Broome, one of the Force 136 officers who had negotiated with Lai Teck in 1944 and 1945 on resisting the Japanese, confirmed that Lai Teck was a "devious" character who was not at all forthcoming.<sup>30</sup> Both Broome and his colleague, John Davis, did not trust Lai Teck at all, due no doubt to their knowledge of Lai Teck as British agent in the pre-war years.

From English, Japanese, and Malayan communist sources now available, it is clear without a shadow of doubt that Lai Teck was a double-agent—— a British agent between 1934 and 1947 and a Japanese agent during the entire Japanese occupation between 1942 and 1945. Scholars such as McLane and Short, who have been given access by the Malaysian government to a four-volume *Basic Papers on the Malayan Communist Party*, compiled by the Special Branch in Kuala Lumpur in 1950, have confirmed that Lai Teck had been planted by the British into the MCP during the pre-war years.<sup>31</sup> Documentary evidence aside, Alan Blades, the Special Branch Director of pre-war years, confirmed to Richard Clutterbuck in 1969 that Lai Teck was indeed a "triple agent", one for the MCP and Comintern, another for the British, and a third for the Japanese.<sup>32</sup>

By far, the most authoritative essay on Lai Teck's career in Malaya is contributed by Professor Yoji Akashi, Faculty of Foreign Studies, Nanzan University, Japan. Based on data via interviews with Japanese Kempeitai officers such as Onishi Satoru, as well as existing English-language sources, Lai Teck is said to have served the French intelligence in Indochina until 1934 and when his identity was unmasked he was handed over by the French *Surete* to the British counter-

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29. Information on Lai Teck was kindly provided by Chen Qingshan (陈青山) in Guangzhou on 8 July 1991 during my interview with him.

30. A 000406/04, Oral History Department, Singapore. See transcript on Richard Broome, interviewed by Ms Tan Beng Luan in Broome's residence at Little Mead, Corfe Castle, Dorset, England on 8 April 1984, p. 38.

31. Charles B. McLane, *Soviet Strategies in Southeast Asia* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 241; Short, *op. cit.*, pp. 39-41.

32. Richard Clutterbuck, *The Long Long War: The Emergency in Malaya, 1948-1960* (London: Cassell, 1967), pp. 14-5. Alan Blades' confirmation in 1969 that Lai Teck was a triple-agent appears in Clutterbuck's two other books: *Riot and Revolution in Singapore and Malaya, 1945-1963* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), p. 37 and also footnote No. 54; *Conflict and Violence in Singapore and Malaysia* (Singapore: Graham Brush, 1984), revised edition, pp. 37 and 356.

part in Hong Kong. And from Hong Kong, Lai Teck arrived in Singapore in early 1935 to penetrate into the Malayan communist movement as Comintern agent.<sup>33</sup> In Singapore, Lai Teck consolidated his position within the communist hierarchy for settling the so-called factional feud among the party leaders between those in favour of a new mass-line policy of united front and those committed to the orthodox Marxist class-line of labour unrest. He is reported to be successful in purging the radical faction, headed by Wu Qifu, chairman of the propaganda department, in 1936.<sup>34</sup> As his prestige and influence had expanded within the Central Executive Committee of the party, Lai Teck succeeded in persuading the party to adopt the more moderate anti-Japanese united front policy in April 1938 and February 1940, thus avoiding direct conflict with the British authorities in Malaya.<sup>35</sup>

When Lai Teck's treacheries against his colleagues were finally exposed in 1947, the MCP, then under the new leadership of Chin Peng (陈平 Chen Ping), set up a committee to investigate into the Lai Teck affair, the report of which is known as "The Wright (Lye Teck) Document", dated 28 May 1948.<sup>36</sup> Predictably, the Document was an official condemnation of Lai Teck, confirming that Lai Teck was never a Comintern agent, was not the protagonist of the Vietnamese Communist Party, and had not undertaken any responsible activities for either the Vietnamese or the Chinese Communist Party.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, the Document also describes how Lai Teck "wormed" his way into the party at the end of 1934 or 1935 when the party was disorganized and decentralized.<sup>38</sup> His rise to leadership position in 1939 was explained in terms of his own "craftiness" and "deception" while maintaining his own prestige and status as self-professed Comintern agent.<sup>39</sup> Although it does not overtly name Lai Teck as the British agent in an unequivocal manner, it does state that "he has had a lot to do with the losses and defeats of our party central through successive terms," e.g., the party central was completely destroyed in 1934; the party central created at the fifth enlarged plenum of the central committee in 1936 was largely broken in 1939 through successive arrests;

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33. Yoji Akashi, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 65-6.

35. *Ibid.*, pp. 65-7.

36. CO 537/3753, *op. cit.*; see Supplement No. 8 to Political Intelligence Journal, Serial 14 (31 July 1948), "The Wright (Lye Teck) Document," pp. 40-6.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

and the party central created at the sixth (1939) and the seventh (1941) enlarged plenums of the central committee sustained some losses.<sup>40</sup> Thus, through his unchallenged claim as the Comintern agent, his craftiness in deceiving his colleagues and his ability to weed out potential rivals via Special Branch's counter-insurgency measures, Lai Teck was elected as party secretary-general in April 1939, a position he held until his desertion in March 1947.

With the periodical weeding out process of top communist leaders by the Special Branch, with or without Lai Teck's aid, one would have expected the weakening, decline or even destruction of the Malayan communist movement during the period under investigation. The fact that the MCP as a radical political movement not only had survived the various purges but had expanded as to be posing a real threat to the colonial rule by 1939-1941 does beg the question "why". The answers may be found in the following deliberations of the issues of ideology and organizational strengths of the party itself.

## **The MCP Ideology in an Era of National Salvation Movement**

It should be pointed at the outset that the MCP ideology during the 1936-1941 era consisted of (1) orthodox Marxism which directed the party to effect class struggle for improved working conditions of the labouring class, (2) Chinese nationalism which meant anti-Japanese boycotts and propaganda to support China's morale and war effort against the invading Japan from 1937, (3) elements of Malayan nationalism in so far as anti-British and anti-colonial rhetoric was concerned, and (4) anti-Fascism as a mark of sympathy for peace and for the defence of the Soviet Union under the Axis pressure. On various occasions, the MCP leadership resorted to promoting both class struggle and anti-Japanese activism which came into conflict with colonial rulers for breaching the law and order. Lai Teck, the British agent, favoured the more moderate anti-Japanese nationalism so as to avoid direct confrontation with the British.

Beginning in 1936, the MCP was walking on two lines: a class line of mobilizing labour and fostering labour disputation and a mass line of united front among all social classes against the Japanese invasion of China as well as between Chi-

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40. *Ibid.*, p. 41. According to Short, Lai Teck succeeded in resolving the MCP factional rivalry of 1936 which resulted in the Special Branch managing to arrest and banish the whole of the central committee. See Short, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

nese and non-Chinese members of the Malayan communist movement. The class line was the traditional and orthodox Marxist line, militant and radical in the approach to social change, via the mobilization of communist-union forces against the capitalist class in the short run. In the long term it aimed to weaken the political and economic foundation of colonial rule. On the other hand, the mass line and united front tactic were moderate in their application, with a view to tapping community sympathy towards China which was under increasing Japanese pressure, a situation that would slowly but surely lead towards an all-out war between the two Eastern nations. The MCP's adoption of the mass line in 1936 was in response first to the Comintern directive arising from the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern in Moscow in July 1935<sup>41</sup> and then to the CCP advice after the Sian Incident in December 1936. There existed two different types of united front: one from below and the other from above. The former aimed at splitting the leaders from the masses, then rallying the masses to the communist cause; the latter at courting both the leaders and the masses, then bringing both into alliance with the communist party.<sup>42</sup>

In 1937, the MCP responded positively to the formal outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war and to the prompting of the CCP to engage in an all-out anti-Japanese united front work by adopting two popular strategies. One was to give moral and physical support to the Tan Kah-kee-led Singapore China Relief Fund campaigns for relief of war casualties in China<sup>43</sup> and the other was to organize its own Anti-enemy Backing-up Societies to provide leadership for the Anti-Japanese National Salvation Movement. The MCP fully capitalized on rising Chinese nationalism in competing with non-communist organizations for popular support.

Five months before the Sino-Japanese war broke out, the MCP was so carried away with the conception and potential of the united front tactic for non-Chinese support that its central committee decided to change the party title to Malayan Racial Communist Party (马来亚各民族共产党).<sup>44</sup> Likewise, the Malayan Communist Youth League was changed to Malayan Racial Emancipation Youth Corps (马来亚各民族解放青年团) and the Malayan General Labour Union to the Malayan Racial General Labour Union (马来亚各民族各业总公会 MRGLU).<sup>45</sup> The

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41. CO 273/630/50147/1, *op. cit.*, see "Review of Communist Activities in Malaya, 1936," p. 2.

42. Hanrahan, *op. cit.*, pp. 46-7.

43. CO 275/149, Onraet, *op. cit.*

44. 7F 74, *op. cit.*, see SS Police Special Branch Political Intelligence Journal, Serial No. 3 (31 March 1937), p. 20.

45. *Ibid.*



addition of "Racial" served as a reminder that the MCP must incorporate members from non-Chinese ethnic groups. By changing the title, the party leadership put the imperative for a multiracial movement against the British colonial rule on the agenda. Unfortunately for the party, the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war in July 1937 saw the party policy tilt towards the popular united front movement among the Chinese,<sup>46</sup> at the cost of developing the racial front. This was to prove costly in the post war years when the Malayan communist movement remained basically a Chinese-dominated one, rendering the British task easier to neutralize and isolate it from non-Chinese support.

The success of the united anti-Japanese front in 1937 which swelled the ranks of the party and its anti-Japanese front organizations, such as the AEBUS,<sup>47</sup> prompted the MCP to streamline its policy. Priority was given to the anti-Japanese front, followed by the anti-imperialist front, related to colonialism and Fascism, and the vocational front, which fomented general strikes against employers under the guidance of the MRGLU.<sup>48</sup> In other words, the MCP's two-line policy of 1936 had been reconfirmed, but in February 1938 it was the mass line of anti-Japanese united front movement which prevailed over the class line of strike action and industrial disputation, apparently under the influence and leadership of Lai Teck.

In April 1938, the standing committee of the MCP passed an important political resolution, known as "The Malayan Communist Party's Ten-point Programme of Struggle" (马来亚共产党十大斗争纲领) which stipulated the immediate party objectives at the stage of the Malayan revolutionary development. The preamble stated clearly that the Malayan people, regardless of race, party, class, belief, and religion should unite and build a Malayan people's united front, with the aim of establishing a democratic system, preserving peace, and chastising Fascism in the Axis camp. The "Ten-point Programme of Struggle" argued that politically, the Malayan people should have the right to vote and be elected into a Malayan parliament which represented the interests of all ethnic groups. Administratively, the Malayan people should enjoy the right to participate in its public service and that the Malayan civil servants should have equal rights and pay as the British administrators. Judicially, all "oppressive" ordinances and acts of colonial rule should be abolished to make way for the practice of English democratic rules and

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46. CO 275/149, *op. cit.*, p. 836.

47. Hanrahan, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

48. WO 106/5701, *Malaya Command Intelligence Summary (MCIS)*, No. 2 (February 1938), p. 27.

regulations in Malaya. Financially, all "harsh" taxes and rents should be removed, usury be penalized, and agriculture be developed. In addition, conditions of workers should be improved and the government should consider the introduction of an eight-hour day system and the provision of insurance and unemployment relief for workers. For the peasantry, land tax should be reduced and rents and harsh rates cancelled. As regards the position of women in society, they should enjoy equal pay and working conditions as men. Moreover, polygamy should be banned and the *muizai* system be prohibited. In defence, Malayan military personnel should have equal rights and pay with their British counterparts and so should the Malayan soldiers *vis-a-vis* the British soldiers in Malaya.

The "Ten-point Programme of Struggle" stated that in international affairs, the British government should prevent military materials and provisions from being imported into Japan and that the Japanese mining and purchase of goods in Malaya be stopped immediately and forthwith. Assistance should be given to China for self-defence against Japanese invaders and the Spanish people should receive support to overthrow the Franco regime. In human rights, freedoms of speech, publication, association, belief, strike action, and organization should be enshrined. Finally, a "peaceful and justice loving" Soviet Union should be defended against Fascist violence and aggression.<sup>49</sup> This new MCP's "Ten-point Programme of Struggle" signalled the official shift in party policy by dropping the class line and anti-British and anti-imperialist policy. Instead, it was the mass line at its highest form — to unite with their adversary, the British authorities, in an all-out war against Japanese expansionism and European Fascism. It was an illusion on the part of the MCP to believe that the British would share their political power with the Malayan people in general and the MCP in particular. Probably the work of Lai Teck, this "Ten-point Programme of Struggle" represented the shift in the MCP policy towards the extreme right. Implicitly denouncing violence and revolutionary change, it put the Malayan communist revolution off the agenda at least for the time being. Still regarding the MCP as their No.1 foe, the British were in no mood to countenance any such reformist proposals for sociopolitical change. They gave no concessions to the revitalized MCP and its front organizations in 1938. In any case, Great Britain still maintained amicable diplomatic relationships with Japan to allow the Malayan government to side with the MCP.

With the failure of its 1938 moderate policy to secure any political concessions from the British, the MCP convened the sixth enlarged plenum of the central

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49. *Malaiya geming ziliao fubian diyi ji*, pp. 3-7. This document is also included in Cheah Boon Kheng (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 95-8.

committee in April 1939 to review the prevailing situation and formulate new policies for the promotion of the communist movement. While reaffirming the overthrow of British colonial rule, abolition of feudal forces, and the creation of an independent Malaya as its ultimate and long-term objectives, the MCP was quick to regard the mass line of anti-imperialist front of all races and all classes as its immediate target for effecting sociopolitical change.<sup>50</sup> The “imperialism” of 1939 included Fascism in Europe, Japanese militarism in China, and British colonialism in Malaya. The MCP deemed Fascism as being a potential menace to the security of Malaya. The MCP’s 1939 “anti-imperialism” was implacably hostile towards colonial rule on the grounds that it was “exploitative” and “repressive” and adverse to providing basic human rights to the Malayan people.<sup>51</sup> However, the MCP rationalized these conflicts by arguing that it could work with the British for the peace and security of Malaya against real or potential Japanese invasion provided the British gave democratic rights to the Malayan people, i.e., allowing the Malayan people to share the political, administrative, and military powers.<sup>52</sup> Although anti-British rhetoric and propaganda were overtly disseminated at the sixth enlarged plenum of the central committee in April 1939, the MCP high command still harboured the hope of a *rapprochement* with the colonial ruler against the backdrop of potential Japanese threat to Malaya. The MCP was prepared to share the leadership of this anti-imperialist front with all other social classes and ethnic groups.<sup>53</sup> At the conclusion of the historic conference, a revised Ten-point Programme for the Party was agreed upon and publicized, with the emphasis on the demand for democratic rights and the preservation of peace and security for Malaya.<sup>54</sup> This revised Ten-point Programme was again moderate in content and the “anti-imperialist” and “anti-British” wording was dropped on purpose. On the issue of defence of Malaya, the MCP’s policy was most “conciliatory”, to say the least. For example, in the event of Japanese invasion of Malaya, the party would support the British by organizing armed resistance. Moreover, the party urged the colonial government to extend the organization of the volunteer corps so that the Malayan people would be trained to defend the country. It also encouraged the government to propagate the knowledge of civil defence, air raid, gas precautions, and first-aid. Finally, the party even suggested that arsenals should be established

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50. *Ibid.*, pp. 9-13.

51. *Ibid.*, pp. 9-11.

52. *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

53. *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9; 11.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

in Malaya in case munitions could not be despatched from England, and that Malaya's northern defence should be strengthened against enemy attack.<sup>55</sup>

Ironically, the radicalization of the MCP ideology and strategy took place soon after the outbreak of the European war in September 1939, culminating in the passing of a vital resolution at the second plenary meeting of the central committee in Singapore on 24 January 1940. The rationale for radicalization of MCP ideology was based on the arguments that the European War, involving Great Britain, would have unpalatable ramifications for the colonies and colonial people. To the MCP, war meant the imposition of higher taxes on the Malayan people, tightening of political control, and curbing democratic rights such as freedoms of speech and publication. To this end, the MCP resolved to whip up an anti-war campaign, propagating the three anti-war slogans: (1) no compulsory conscription of soldiers, (2) no increase in taxes and financial burdens of the people, and (3) no deprivation of freedom of the Malayan people.<sup>56</sup> As the anti-war campaign bordered on implicit anti-British war effort and anti-colonial rule, the British took repressive measures against the MCP ringleaders. As a result, the party leaders became more militant and its ideology decisively more radical.

The radical and fighting programme adopted at the second plenary meeting of the central committee in January 1940 endorsed the anti-war campaign, applauded labour disputation and strike fomentation against the capitalist employers for the benefit of the working class, and toughened its stance against Western imperialism in general and British imperialism in particular. The January 1940 resolution put the MCP on the centre stage in leading a united anti-imperialist front of all races and of such social classes as the workers, peasants, and the petty bourgeoisie to wage a class warfare. The MCP's strategy of economic struggle (经济斗争) meant more labour disputation and industrial strikes, a classical Marxist line of action so often adopted when the party swung back to the left. In the anti-imperialist united front movement, the MCP approved of the Malayan Chinese action to aid China under Japanese duress and it urged the Malays, for the first time, to unite and fight for the independence of Malaya themselves against colonial rule.<sup>57</sup> As regards the Indians, the MCP encouraged them to unite and organize themselves for the cause of Indian independence and for improved socioeconomic conditions of their countrymen.<sup>58</sup> Finally, the party's April 1939 "Ten-point

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55. 7F 74, *op. cit.*, see Supplement No. 1 of 1939 to SS Police Special Branch Political Intelligence Journal, p. 7.

56. *Malaiya geming ziliao fubian diyi ji*, p. 52.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

Programme of Struggle” was substantially revised, replacing the innocuous demand for democratic rights with a fighting platform — “the eviction of British imperialism from Malaya, the attainment of national independence, and the establishment of a democratic republic in Malaya.”<sup>59</sup>

During the first six months of 1940, the MCP’s challenge to the colonial authorities was real, persistent, and protracted. Its anti-Japanese arm, the AEBUS, continued to operate despite the dampening effects arising from the arrest of its leaders. Its industrial arm, the MRGLU, engineered numerous strikes in Malaya and organized one of the biggest May Day demonstrations in Singapore with 50,000 workers and members participating. Its anti-war and anti-British propaganda remained strong and copious. The British answer to the MCP’s belligerence was crackdowns. Due partly to relentless British repression and partly to the lack of success in its anti-British drive, a meeting was called in July 1940 with representatives from the party, the Singapore General Labour Union, and the Malayan AEBUS, to discuss the policy of the party. At this July meeting, it was decided to cease anti-British hostility by concentrating instead on anti-Japanese platform.<sup>60</sup> However, this decision was overruled at a central committee meeting in August 1940 with the anti-British plank being reinstated.<sup>61</sup> It was not until the CCP had intervened first in July and then in September 1940 that the MCP relented. The new party policy entailed the cessation of all anti-British movements and strikes, the concentration on the anti-Japanese front, and non-intervention in the campaign initiated by the Chinese community in Malaya to aid Britain’s war effort.<sup>62</sup> The CCP’s intervention was based on its own perception that Britain and China were now in the same anti-Japanese camp and any anti-British drive in Malaya would damage the common cause of defeating Japanese aggression. Being a senior party and a source of inspiration for many of the Chinese-educated members of the MCP, the CCP’s advice and instructions were often respected, if not accepted. For the British, any challengers to their rule were detained and banished and detain and banish over 1,000 communists they did during 1940 from Malaya.<sup>63</sup>

The MCP’s moderate and conciliatory platform on Great Britain and the colonial rule was enshrined in a resolution at the seventh enlarged plenum of the

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59. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

60. WO 208/1523, *MCIS*, No.7 (August-September 1940), p. 133.

61. *Ibid.*

62. WO 208/1523, *MCIS*, No.8 (October 1940), p. 155. See also McLane, *op. cit.*, p. 243.

63. FO 371/24712/4834, Deportation of Chinese Communists from Malaya, see the Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies, CO, to OAG, SS, 29 October 1940, on the figure of over 1,000 communists awaiting deportation to China.

central committee, held in July 1941 in Singapore. By then, war had broken out in Europe in September 1939 and, more importantly, Hitler's Germany had invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941. Against this changing international situation and sombre mood, the MCP held its seventh enlarged party plenum at which the party's so-called "three missions" (三大任务) and "six policies" (六大主张) were passed. One of the three missions was to establish a Malayan anti-Fascist united front for the defence of the Soviet Union, China, and Malaya. Included among the six policies were: assisting the Soviet Union in her righteous war; promoting the cooperation among China, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and the USA against Fascist forces as represented by Germany, Italy, and Japan; urging Western nations to help China's war effort; and demanding Great Britain and the USA to carry out political and economic boycott of Japan.<sup>64</sup> A last but not least important policy demanded that the British should strengthen the civil defence, mobilize manpower, resist Japanese invasion, and protect the security of Malaya.<sup>65</sup> To be sure, the intensification of war in Europe and the real possibility of Japanese invading Malaya combined to make the anti-Fascist and anti-Japanese campaigns the most urgent on the party's agenda. The anti-British and anti-imperialist rhetoric had by now been shelved and so had been the overt anti-British drive. The Malayan communists had never been short of causes but this time it was the Axis which bore the brunt of their attacks and fury.<sup>66</sup>

The MCP had since 1938 been putting out feelers for closer cooperation with the British against what it conceived as being their common enemy — Japan. In any case, six months before the Japanese attack on Malaya in December 1941, it again made a series of exploratory proposals to the British, offering assistance in the event of war.<sup>67</sup> It was uncharitable of the Governor of the SS, Sir Shenton Thomas, to suggest that "the Party has come out wholeheartedly in support of the local Government" only since the Japanese invasion of Malaya.<sup>68</sup> It was not until 20 December 1941 that the communist detainees were released *en masse* and that the British-MCP concord was officially endorsed. This was a case of too little, too late. The united front of the two former adversaries that had

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64. *Malaiya geming ziliao fubian diyi ji*, pp. 122-3.

65. *Ibid.*, p. 123.

66. CO 273/666/50336, Labour Unrest in Malaya, 1941, see extract from *Weekly Intelligence Summary*, No. 24 (August 1941), item 8.

67. Hanrahan, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

68. CO 273/666/50336, *op. cit.*, see Governor, SS, to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, CO., 31 December 1941, p. 1.

been struck on the eve of the fall of Singapore was maintained throughout the era of the Japanese occupation of Malaya.

The above deliberations do illustrate the vicissitudes and fluctuations in the MCP ideology during the period discussed. The MCP ideology, be it Marxist or nationalist, has had considerable appeal to the immigrant Chinese community generally and the Chinese labouring class in particular against the backdrop of the Sino-Japanese War and the European War. The steady but thorough politicization of the Chinese immigrant community in Malaya since the fall of the Manchu regime in 1912<sup>69</sup> rendered the dissemination of the MCP ideology and propaganda less difficult. Lai Teck succeeded in removing some of his own colleagues and rivals either for the British interests or for his own power but he had been unable to bring the Malayan communist movement to a halt. This was because the MCP ideology contained vibrant racial and cultural elements of anti-Japanese Chinese nationalism, a popular outrage and outcry of the age.

## **The Party and Its Front Organizations**

If the Malayan communist movement of the 1930-35 was a grim struggle for survival, the period that followed up to the Japanese occupation of Malaya in 1942 was one of blatant expansion. From 1936, the Malayan communists rode on two tidal waves which swept them back into contention as a counter-political force. The first was their successful mobilization of labour unions which flexed their industrial muscles and served as the backbone of the Malayan communist movement. The second was the burgeoning National Salvation Movement of the Chinese community emanating from the Sino-Japanese conflict from 1931 and culminating in the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war in July 1937. The capacity to organize and mobilize thousands of Malayan Chinese workers for strikes for improved working and living conditions is well documented by the works of Yeo Kim Wah and M.R. Stenson.<sup>70</sup> The success of the MCP-led AEBUS for operating and enforcing prolonged anti-Japanese boycotts has also been well established.<sup>71</sup> By capitalizing on and providing its own independent leadership to these two move-

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69. See C. F. Yong, *Tan Kah-kee, the Making of an Overseas Chinese Legend* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989) and C. F. Yong and R. B. McKenna, *The Kuomintang Movement in British Malaya, 1912-1949* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1990), for politicization process in the Chinese community in Malaya.

70. Yeo Kim Wah, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-79; M.R. Stenson, *Industrial Conflict in Malaya* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 13-37.

ments, the MCP not only deepened its industrial base but also broadened its mass support. By the time the Japanese landed on the Malayan coasts, the MCP had become a formidable force, capable of providing leadership to the resistance movement against the Japanese.

In the areas of party structure and organizational principles the MCP made few changes. However, the Standing Committee of the MCP's Central Committee proclaimed a vital document, entitled "the Iron Discipline of the Malayan Communist Party" in July 1940, which stipulated how discipline could be achieved. Obedience, self-sacrifice, giving one's life for the sake of the party, and criticism and self-criticism were the stuff of iron discipline to be imparted into the mind of every party member. A fine party member was never to betray the party secrets and his own comrades even at the cost of his life.<sup>72</sup> "No sacrifice of blood is too great in the service of the proletariat."<sup>73</sup> Many members indeed sacrificed their lives during the Japanese occupation for the cause of communism; some clearly did not.

In terms of numerical strength, the party was clearly on the mend with 379 members in March 1937,<sup>74</sup> 1,000 in April 1939,<sup>75</sup> 1,700 in May 1940<sup>76</sup> and the peak of 5,000 probably in 1941.<sup>77</sup> Party cadres and members were drawn from its numerous front organizations, notably, the MGLU and AEBUS, which had large membership, ranging from 20,000 in April 1939<sup>78</sup> to an estimated 50,000<sup>79</sup> in May 1940 and probably to 100,000 in 1941.<sup>80</sup> In April 1939, it was officially decided

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71. Stephen Leong, *op. cit.*, pp. 411-522; Chen Ligui, *op. cit.*, pp. 53-66.

72. *Malaiya geming ziliao fubian diyi ji*, pp. 122-3.

73. Hanrahan, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

74. WO 106/5701, *MCIS*, No.10 (October 1937), p. 194.

75. 7F 74, *op. cit.*, see Supplement No. 1 of 1939 to SS Police Special Branch Political Intelligence Journal, p. 1.

76. McLane, *op. cit.*, p. 244.

77. Hanrahan, *op. cit.*, p. 59; J. H. Brimmell, *Communism in Southeast Asia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 148.

78. 7F 74, *op. cit.*, see Supplement No.1 of 1939 to SS Police Special Branch Political Intelligence Journal, p. 1.

79. McLane, *op. cit.*, p. 244.

80. Brimmell, *op. cit.*, p. 148; Virginia Thompson and Richard Adloff, *The Left Wing in Southeast Asia* (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1950), p. 126.



that subscriptions to party membership were to be paid monthly and in accordance with the socialist principle which meant that there was a monthly subscription of 10 cents for members earning a monthly salary of \$5, rising to \$4 for a monthly salary of \$30.<sup>81</sup> The absence of a financial crisis within the party during this period may be explained by the rising numbers of party members who upheld the iron discipline of the party by paying monthly subscriptions. When reviewing the growth of party membership at the seventh enlarged plenum of the central committee in July 1941, the party confirmed that its membership had increased tenfold since September 1936 and two and a half since April 1939.<sup>82</sup>

The increase in party membership from 1936 allowed the party to develop two types of party cadres: one open and the other secret. The open cadres had high profile; they were those who participated openly in the labour movement and the National Salvation Movement so as to win over non-communist sympathies and public support. On the other hand, the secret cadres remained the masterminds behind the scene. As these secret cadres were in general of high calibre, sound leadership qualities, and excellent capacity for organizational or propaganda work, they were sheltered by the party from public exposure and government arrests.

Although Singapore remained the nerve-centre of the Malayan communist movement, party membership and organizations spilled over from the traditional geographical areas of the Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States to the Unfederated Malay States of Kelantan, Trengganu, Johor, and Kedah. By the convening of the seventh enlarged plenum of the central committee in July 1941, Perlis was the only state where the MCP had yet to establish branches and recruit members. Parallel to the spread of party membership and organization to cover the entire Malaya was the recruitment of members among women. As female membership increased, the party began to pay attention to their needs and demands. Upon discovery of any love affairs among party members, the party organizations were advised to review whether the love affairs would affect their party work and whether they should be judged "proper or improper" (是否正确).<sup>83</sup> Party interests had always to take the priority, and the review proceedings by the party organizations monitored this.

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81. 7F 74, *op. cit.*, see Supplement No.1 of 1939 to SS Police Special Branch Political Intelligence Journal, p. 2.

82. *Malaiya geming ziliao fubian diyi ji*, p. 95.

83. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

As a reflection of the party having come of age, the MCP launched a so-called "Stakanov Movement" in 1939 which entailed the recruitment of new party members, the instillation of a new fighting spirit into members to carry out mass political and organizational work, and the education of members in Marxist and Leninist theory so as to better equip members to carry out party policy.<sup>84</sup> As more new party members joined the ranks in 1941, the MCP again made the educational drive to impart basic communist theory one of its immediate major tasks.<sup>85</sup>

Added evidence that the MCP had become a formidable force by 1941 was the mushrooming of party newspapers and journals for consumption by party members in particular. The party in Singapore published *Emancipation News* (解放报), while the parties in Selangor, Penang, Perak, and Negeri Sembilan edited *Xianfeng Bao* (先锋报), *Gongdao Bao* (公道报), and *Dazhong Bao* (大众报) respectively. As well, the parties in Melaka, South Johor, and Pahang also produced their respective newspapers, namely, *Shenglu Bao* (生路报), *Qunzhong Bao* (群众报), and *Kangdi Bao* (抗敌报). The MCP in 1941 also published two Indian (Tamil) newspapers: *The Workers* (工人报) in Singapore and, *The Unity* (团结报), in Penang.<sup>86</sup> However, most of these newspapers were published either weekly or irregularly.

One area upon which the MCP made considerable inroads was the English-speaking Indian community in Singapore, some of whom joined the party during the years 1937-41. In 1937, it was reported that there existed an Indian branch of the MCP in Singapore and that the English-speaking Indian communist members helped translate the English-language documents on the MCP's organizational work.<sup>87</sup> However, the size of the Indian membership and the identity of Indian leaders were not made known by the Special Branch on this occasion. In March 1938, the Special Branch reported that the Indian branch of the MCP in Singapore adopted a new name called Friends of China Society in tune with the general MCP's new strategy of anti-Japanese united front. The Special Branch was, however, more alarmed that Indian branches had been organized in Melaka with 200 members in Friends of China Society and 208 members in Indian Mutual Help Association. The leader of the Singapore Friends of China Society was identified as the secretary of the Foreign Department of the All India Congress Committee

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84. 7F 74, *op. cit.*, see Supplement No.1 of 1939 to SS Police Special Branch Political Intelligence Journal, p. 3.

85. *Malaiya geming ziliao fubian diyi ji*, p. 123.

86. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

87. WO 106/5701, MCIS, No.7 (July 1937), p. 140.

with no name given.<sup>88</sup> In June 1938, the Indian branch of the MCP in Singapore was instrumental in preparing English-language propaganda materials for the MCP, a contribution greatly appreciated by the party.<sup>89</sup> Another Special Branch report surfaced in December 1938, confirming that there were 60 Indian communist members in Singapore and their Indian branch controlled some 600 Indian labourers. However, the Indian leaders were reported to be inactive except to hold political meetings in various houses which were sparsely attended. The Indian branch did not seem to give any material assistance to the MCP.<sup>90</sup> In July 1940, the Special Branch suspected that "seditious" hand-bills printed in Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, and English found in Singapore were the work of either the Indian Youth League and/or the Indian Communist Party (the Indian Branch of the MCP).<sup>91</sup> The above evidence appears to confirm that the MCP had achieved a minor breakthrough in winning the radical section of the Indian community in the SS to join the movement. However, a lack of primary sources renders it difficult for an analysis in depth of the Indian leadership, organization, and ideology within the Malayan communist movement.

By far, the biggest failure of the MCP during the latter part of the 1930s was undeniably its inability to recruit Malay members into its rank-and-file. Lip service and political rhetoric were aplenty to remind the party to unite with the Malays in the fight against colonialism, Fascism, and Japanese imperialism and for the independence of Malaya. In 1936, the MCP did establish a Malayan Racial Emancipation League (马来亚各民族解放同盟) to bring Malays and Indians into the communist fold and to organize peasants' unions. Among the prominent Malay activists were Sutan Jenain and Salim who did their best to promote the anti-British and anti-imperialist movement.<sup>92</sup> However, the activities of this front organization of the MCP lapsed after the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war in July 1937 because of the drastic shift in party policy from anti-British colonialism to anti-Japanese imperialism. The demise of the Malayan Racial Emancipation League, the shift in party policy in 1937 and 1938, and the lack of bilingual party members to work among the rural Malays were largely responsible for the MCP's dismal failure in

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88. *Ibid.*, *MCIS*, No.3 (March 1938), p. 53.

89. *Ibid.*, *MCIS*, No.6 (June 1938), p. 116.

90. *Ibid.*, *MCIS*, No.12 (December 1938), p. 233.

91. WO 208/1523, *MCIS*, No. 6 (July 1940), p. 107.

92. CO 537/3752/55400/5, Pt. II, Malaya Political Developments, Political Intelligence Journals, 1948, see Supplement No. 5 of 1948 to Malayan Security Service Political Intelligence Journal, No. 11/48 (15 June 1948), p. 8.

winning over the radical sector of the Malay population. In 1938, the birth of the Kesatuan Melayu Muda headed by such radical Malays as Ibrahim bin Haji Ja'acob and Ishak bin Haji Mohammed, may also point to the fact that this radical leftwing party had succeeded in siphoning off some of the potential MCP members to join its ranks. Finally, the decrease in ex-PKI members resident in Malaya<sup>93</sup> was also responsible for the MCP's lack of success in inducing Malays to take a more active part in the Malayan communist movement as had been the case in the 1920s.

Notwithstanding the adverse historical consequences deriving from the absence of Malay participation and support, the MCP scored two of its biggest successes in the pre-war years when applying the class and mass lines in response to changing political situation internally and internationally. First, with the mobilization of Malayan workers in general and Chinese workers in particular, the MCP deepened its popular base. Second, by joining in and leading the National Salvation Movement via the organization of numerous AEBUS's, the party succeeded in broadening its mass support. It is the success in these two vital areas, together with the general appeal of the MCP ideology in an age of anti-capitalism, anti-imperialism, and anti-Fascism, that were responsible for the expansion of the Malayan communist movement in the years 1936-1941.

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93. *Ibid.*