

## Introduction

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# Introduction

In a previous analysis of Chinese-language newspapers and journals and Chinese organizations in Malaya (present-day Malaysia and Singapore) from the end of World War II until around 1960, I discussed the rise among the Chinese in Malaya of a China-oriented identity consciousness (i.e., viewing China as one's homeland, having a stronger interest in developments happening in China than in Malayan affairs, and getting involved in Chinese internal politics), its eventual decline, and the appearance of a deep-rooted Malayan identity in its place.<sup>1</sup> However, the analysis only dealt with the editorial opinions of Chinese Communist Party (CCP)-related periodicals and the size and activities of the major Chinese organizations, such as the Malayan branch of the China Democratic League (CDL; Zhongguo Minzu Tongmeng).

However, that earlier study did not examine how the China-oriented identity of the whole Chinese community in Malaya was reflected in their political and social activity, what kind of organizations participated in such activity, and when and how such organizations began to foster (or be converted to) a Malaya-oriented identity, or when and how they disappeared (or were compelled to disband) before Malayanization could occur.

The earlier study also did not discuss important elements for measuring the level of China-oriented identity, such as the policy that the Chinese government (including the Chinese consulates in Malaya) implemented at the local level, the influence that this policy exerted on Malayan Chinese, and the perception that the Chinese community in Malaya had of the Chinese government and its consulates.

I would like to take up these yet untouched questions in the present volume, looking at the conditions under which the Chinese community nurtured its Malaya-oriented identity and at the kind of movements this phenomenon was linked to. For in order to gain a total picture of the evolution of identity consciousness and analyze its meaning, it is necessary to investigate not only the depth of China-oriented identity, but also the process by which a Malaya-oriented identity came into existence.

## I.

Much of the research to date has focussed on the connection between social movements among Malayan Chinese and their Chinese homeland prior to the outbreak of World War II, especially from 1937 when the Sino-Japanese War broke out and they lent support to China's struggle against the Japanese. However, concerning the postwar period, when connections with China continued to run deep and were even strengthened in part, there has been almost nothing written about the relation between China and the Malayan Chinese community or the changes that were taking place in those relations. This is because the main current in the study of overseas Chinese shifted toward the analysis of their economic power and their contributions to national independence in their countries of residence, and any connections to China were for the most part ignored, thus creating a gap between the content of the prewar and postwar research.

In Wang Gungwu's "Chinese Politics in Malaya," still the best piece of basic analysis on the political history of the Malayan Chinese, the community is divided into three groups according to their levels of "commitment to politics in China," a typology that remains the most widely accepted approach to the subject. Wang describes his categories in the following manner.

Group A which maintains links with the politics of China . . . and is concerned always to identify with the destiny of China. . . . Group B which consists of the hard-headed and realistic majority of the Chinese who are more concerned with the low-posture and indirect politics of trade and community associations. . . . [They] rarely express themselves on questions of political ideals and long-term political goals. . . . Group C, it is . . . generally committed to some sort of Malayan [now Malaysian] loyalty.<sup>2</sup>

Wang sums up the characteristic features of the period from the end of the war to Malayan independence as follows.

The Chinese in Malaya . . . [were] jubilant at the Allied victory and by the emergence of China as one of the Great Powers. . . . Group B . . . looked forward to

benefits which a strong China might, perhaps only indirectly, bring to them, and Group A resumed their enthusiastic involvement in China's politics, some returning to China in the hope of joining its reconstruction on the ground floor.

. . . a new element had entered their calculations—the power and organizational skill of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) *with their mainly Group A Chinese leadership*. . . .

. . . we should examine the reconstitution of the three groups. . . . First, Group A and its immediate division into those who favored Kuomintang (KMT) nationalists or some of the ineffective anti-KMT liberal democrats and those who threw in their lot with Communists and actively supported what they saw as their Malayan counterpart, the MCP. . . . The divisions had no real local context and the issues were mainly those related to the reunification of China. . . . The MCP leaders, which included Group C Chinese recruited into the movement during the war, did make an effort to define their political goals in local and Malayan national terms, but within the community as a whole this was not seen as its central aim and most Chinese either supported or rejected the MCP because of its relationship with the larger aims of Chinese communism. [3] (*italics added*)

Wang had an accurate understanding of the postwar issues and discussed them objectively and incisively, showing that Malayan Chinese interest in China peaked just after the war and pointing out that leaders of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) whose utmost objective was to liberate Malaya consisted mainly of China-oriented members. However, as indicated by his analysis and methodology, Wang's aim was to present an overview of the political consciousness and activities of the Malayan Chinese since the end of the nineteenth century, and not to give a detailed period-by-period description of the evolution of such consciousness and activities. Therefore, he did not delve specifically into the kinds of movements that were created in Malaya during the postwar peak of interest in China, how these affected the movements of MCP-based Group A Chinese, or how they evolved. Such analysis had to await future research. Unfortunately these questions were not taken up with the interest they deserve.

The research that has been done to date can be summarized as follows.

Within the enormous amount of literature that has been published on the postwar political consciousness and activities of the Malayan Chinese, there are very few works expressing the opinion that they were not interested at all in what was happening in China. The only research that this author is aware of in this vein is the book by Edgar O'Ballance in which he describes "a new spirit: a sense of pride in the achievements of the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA), and determination to take a part in shaping the future of the country." He then adds, "The thoughts and ambitions of many Chinese were suddenly switched from their old homeland and re-focused on

Malaya, where they intended to go on living.”<sup>4</sup> Using the word “sudden” to describe this postwar switch in thoughts and ambitions is not appropriate or accurate.

The Malayan Union Scheme proposed by Great Britain in October 1945 was discarded due to opposition from Malay conservatives, and in its place the Federation of Malaya was formed in February 1948, under which sweeping restrictions were imposed on residents of non-Malay origin for gaining citizenship. The Chinese showed little enthusiasm about getting involved in the Malayan Union issue, even though citizenship became the focal point of disputes. Victor Purcell, a pioneer in the study of the Malayan Chinese community wrote, “Altogether there was apathy among the Chinese to the Malayan Union. . . . The Chinese press still showed very little interest, though their columns were filled with China news.”<sup>5</sup>

Many other researchers concurred with Purcell.<sup>6</sup> From a similar point of view, Khoo Kay Kim commented that the relaxation of conditions for granting citizenship by amending the constitutional law in 1952 had aimed at shifting interest among Malayan Chinese from events in China to Malayan affairs.<sup>7</sup> The editorial of the June 16, 1947 issue of the *Nan Chiau Jit Pao* argued that Malaya was still not an independent state at that time, and it was still unclear what rights would actually be bestowed on a “citizen,” thus it was only natural that the Chinese would prefer to retain their Chinese nationality.<sup>8</sup> While there were also such opinions as “their disinterest in Malaya stemmed from a deep interest in China,”<sup>9</sup> and “feelings of loyalty towards China continued,”<sup>10</sup> another writer stated, “the non-Malays were probably more pre-occupied with the problem of personal rehabilitation, . . .”<sup>11</sup>

The MCP had been an organization made up mainly of Chinese since its founding in 1930. It directed the anti-Japanese movement during the Japanese occupation of Malaya, and in the early postwar years until its call for an armed struggle in June 1948 to overthrow the colonial government, it had held legal status and had become the main organization for political activity in the Chinese community. Thus it was quite natural that the MCP would become an important topic of research when studying the pre- and immediate postwar periods.

Cheah Boon Kheng, the leading expert on the MCP, made the following comment about the party’s view of China.

“The leading part played by the MCP/MPAJU [Malayan People’s Anti-Japanese Union]/MPAJA [Malayan People’s Anti-Japanese Army] in these celebrations [the Double Tenth of 1945] attested to the fact that they were seen by Chinese and by themselves as Chinese organizations and Chinese patriots owing a loyalty to China.”<sup>12</sup> On the other hand he stated elsewhere

that “it was only from 1937 to 1941, because of the anti-Japanese movement, that the MCP drifted with the current of Chinese nationalism.”<sup>13</sup>

Cheah saw an MCP with China leanings only during the period 1937–41, and he was of opinion that in the postwar period only in 1945 could the party be seen as Chinese patriots.

Regardless of the character of the MCP itself, there is the view that the party’s emphasis on China was merely a tool to expand its organization;<sup>14</sup> but this view does not clarify how the party evaluated its relations with China.

Charles Gamba, a scholar on the postwar Malayan labor movement, views the China-inclination of the communist sympathizer in Malaya as more steadfast and long lasting: “Chinese ‘patriotism’ and Communism, in so far as the Chinese Communist sympathizer was concerned, seemed to blend and often to be interchangeable.”<sup>15</sup>

Leong Yee Fong has recently provided the following interesting insight concerning the labor movement under the direction of the MCP.

The General Labour Unions [GLU; MCP-influenced national trade union, renamed to the Federation of Trade Unions in 1947], while emphasizing on Indian labour mobilization, did not make any positive efforts to win over Chinese labour. . . . On the contrary, the GLUs instead of concentrating on the Chinese labour problems. . . . were more concerned with political issues in China that had little relevance to labour struggling amidst the confusion of post-war economic shortages and low wages.<sup>16</sup>

Unfortunately Leong does not go any further into the MCP’s China connection, thus leaving us without any idea of how the MCP, GLU, and FTU got involved in Chinese politics and what kinds of specific activities they carried on.

In the above literature we do find reference to China-oriented tendencies among the Malayan Chinese in general and the MCP in particular, but we are given no analysis of the phenomenon. As a result, these studies fail to deal with the kinds of China-related activities that were carried on, how widespread these activities were, and how they evolved; moreover, we have no clue as to either why, or in what manner the Malayan Chinese community’s orientation toward China changed. The present volume will attempt to fill this gap in the analysis.

## II.

The bond between the Malayan Chinese and China proper was made up of three elements: the strength of China-oriented identity among the Malayan

Chinese, the existence of Malayan Chinese organizations and activities that pursued involvement in China's internal politics, and the Chinese government's involvement in Malayan Chinese affairs.

What will be referred to as "China" here is the Republic of China until September 1949 and the People's Republic of China that was established in October of that year. Both Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Kuomintang (KMT) factions existed since their split in the 1920s, and openly vied with each other to obtain the support of overseas Chinese all over the world. The KMT factions not only established branches of the Kuomintang, but also were able to bring under their influence Chinese Chambers of Commerce in each country of the world. However, their supporters constituted only a small number of elite Chinese, including the business community, and rarely appealed to the overseas Chinese masses. In contrast, the CCP factions were able to garner support from among educators, students, workers, farmers, small-scale merchants, shop assistants, petty traders, and hawkers, and thus enjoyed greater influence than the KMT factions in local politics and society. Furthermore, after moving to Taiwan, the KMT government lost its largest base of support from overseas Chinese when its administrative control of the home provinces of Fujian and Guangdong ended. In effect, leftist and CCP organizations, until their suppression and dissolution, embodied general overseas Chinese perceptions and became community spokespersons. This is why leftist/CCP organizations and their development need to be at the center of any analysis concerning Chinese sympathies and China-oriented identity consciousness.

However, when we analyze overseas Chinese of the postwar era till the late 1950s, studying only leftist/CCP organizations will not suffice to explain the sense of belonging or identity of overseas Chinese on the whole. When dealing with Malaya, there are three reasons for having to broaden one's analytical focus.

To begin with, leftist/CCP organizations in postwar Malaya were suppressed, and many of them declared illegal or at least rendered ineffective. These organizations' cessation of operations, their going underground, or disappearance cannot necessarily be equated with a mental transformation in their supporters resulting in disinterest toward China and an orientation toward Malayan affairs, because there is a fairly long time gap that exists between organizational disappearance and mental transformation.

We are also faced with a serious paucity of information related to the activities and opinions of these leftist/CCP groups after they were outlawed, making it very difficult to ascertain what exactly happened to cause changes in the perceptions of the majority of Chinese who had formerly participated

in and supported these groups and later chose to remain in Malaya. Publications by central organizations, such as the *Min Sheng Pao* of the MCP and *Nan Chiau Jit Pao* of the CDL Malayan branch, are excellent sources of information about perceptions and activities, but after they were banned in June 1948 and September 1950 respectively, one only rarely heard about the MCP which continued illegal activities. The leftist/CCP groups that were not outlawed at the time (several mass and united front organizations apparently continued to exist) lost their organs and thus the ability to impart information on their own behalf. This loss of leftist/CCP sources has made it necessary for researchers to seek out other means for measuring changes in China-oriented identity consciousness and orientation toward China.

A preliminary attempt to trace how long these leftist/CCP organizations were able to continue operations has produced only a very small amount of data, and even if we could obtain information on how long they continued, it would be impossible to discover from this such important facts as organization size, character, membership, and perceptions. Therefore, any analysis of those organizations which were left untouched by official suppression and allowed to exist would turn out to be very limited in scope.

However, there are records of those who left the CCP factions and concomitantly began to express an increasing interest in Malayan affairs. This information has allowed us to trace these people and will be the source for the analysis presented in this volume.

The second reason why we must focus also on non-leftist/CCP groups has to do with non-political groups, like mutual assistance and friendship associations, which did support the leftist/CCP organizations, but were not disbanded after the latter were outlawed. One example of such an association is the Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan (the Fujian Association). After the leftists were outlawed, these associations continued their CCP sympathies for a time, but given the anti-CCP and repressive policies implemented in Malaya, they quickly distanced themselves from the CCP and became increasingly interested in local affairs. It is therefore necessary to examine the relationship between these mutual aid/friendship associations and political organizations having CCP sympathies, as well as how they lost interest in China.

The third reason is the existence of a China-oriented identity that went beyond the rivalry between the CCP and KMT factions. It is an emotional attachment to China that ran deeply within overseas Chinese regardless of their political leanings. This identity is probably best characterized by how Malayan Chinese came to understand the Chinese consulates in Malaya, believing that they should protect them whenever their civil rights were infringed



upon. In fact, the Chinese would request direct protection from the consulates or at least that they come to terms with the local colonial authorities on their behalf.

One more important indicator that should be taken into account concerning the perceptions of overseas Chinese in general is the editorial positions taken by the Chinese-language newspapers they read. While the CCP Chinese newspapers were banned from publication, during the early 1950s following the establishment of the People's Republic, many of the Kuomintang and neutral newspapers gradually became pro-CCP in their views, thus similarly influencing their readerships, and then gradually switched their attention and sympathies to local Malayan affairs.

After Malayan governments (Federation of Malaya and Singapore) banned the celebration of National Day on October 1 commemorating the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the celebration of the Double Tenth (on October 10) commemorating the founding of the Kuomintang government began to take on an emotional sense of belonging to China over and above party lines. Those who were no longer able to celebrate October 1 took part in celebrating the Double Tenth at the grass-roots level and separated themselves from the elite who openly supported the Chiang Kai-shek regime. However, these Double Tenth celebrations were gradually scaled down and eventually disappeared altogether due to the growth of a deeper Malaya-oriented consciousness, restrictions imposed by the Malayan authorities, and the growing isolation of the die-hard Kuomintang supporters from the overseas Chinese masses.

Therefore, discovering how Malayan Chinese placed the Chinese consulates in their lives, how the position of Chinese-language newspapers changed regarding China and Malaya, and how the celebration of the Double Tenth evolved is probably the most effective way available for viewing the changes in China-oriented identity consciousness among Malayan Chinese after the break up of the leftist/CCP organizations.

Finally, the term "China-oriented identity consciousness" will be used in this book to indicate how overseas Chinese looked upon the Chinese mainland as their homeland and how they felt in one way or another obligated to participate in Chinese internal politics. We should emphasize that whether or not one wanted to return home to China or actually did is not the point here. On the other hand, "Malaya-oriented identity consciousness" is the term that will be used to describe Malayan Chinese who believed their home country was Malaya, consciously sought to participate in local politics, and desired to obtain the legal rights granted to the citizens of Malaya. The most important question that will be taken up in the following pages is by what process China-

oriented identity consciousness was transformed into Malaya-oriented identity consciousness within the local Malayan Chinese community.

### III.

This book is structured as follows.

In Chapter 1, I will try to discover how important the involvement of Malayan Chinese in China's internal politics was. Such involvement will be gauged from the scope and diversity of organizations that participated in various public gatherings and assemblies, sponsored mainly by the Malayan Communist Party, which in the research to date has been discussed only in relation to its involvement in Malayan local politics. I will then trace when, how and why these gatherings died out, in other words, the process by which Malayan Chinese became oriented toward Malayan local politics. I will follow the way in which the celebration of China's national day, the Double Tenth, which formed the broadest base of China-oriented identity consciousness, completely disappeared by 1958, after not only leftist and Malayan Communist Party organizations and activities but also Kuomintang movements were restricted and banned in Malaya.

Chapter 2 investigates when and how Chinese-language newspapers, which often referred to China as "the homeland" and "our country," began to use these same terms in reference to Malaya. This change of editorial perception that took place in these newspapers is symbolized by publication holidays related to Chinese events becoming holidays for no specific reason and finally disappearing during the 1950s.

In Chapter 3, the topic of the Chinese consulates in Malaya is dealt with in relation to how they were unable to meet the expectations of Malayan Chinese concerning the protection of their civil rights. Such powerlessness on the part of the Chinese consular corps to help the Malayan Chinese politically and socioeconomically became one important factor in the growing disinterest toward China's internal affairs. In place of the Chinese consulate, the Malayan Chinese Association took on the central role in the struggle for civil rights protection. This further accelerated the turning of Malayan Chinese away from China and toward greater identification with Malayan affairs.

In Chapter 4, I will take up the question of how important and influential the Chinese government's overseas Chinese policy was at the local level in Malaya and the circumstances under which such importance and influence soon waned. In order to answer this question, I will first describe the process for selecting representatives to the Republic of China's National Assembly of 1948, a process that was repeated for the selection of representatives to the

People's Republic of China National People's Congress in 1954. Then I will look at China's involvement in overseas Chinese education, and the selection of athletes for the 1948 Olympic Games in London.

The examination and discussion of all the above issues seeks to explain the extent that postwar Malayan Chinese identified themselves with China, and the way this identity consciousness was reoriented toward Malaya.

## Notes

- 1 Fujio Hara, "Sengo Maraya no aikoku kakyō (I)" [The patriotic overseas Chinese of postwar Malaya (I)], *Ajia keizai* 27, no. 1 (1986); idem, "Sengo Maraya no aikoku kakyō (II)" [The patriotic overseas Chinese of postwar Malaya (II)], *Ajia keizai* 27, no. 2 (1986); and idem, "Maraya ni okeru Chūgoku-ha kajin soshiki no keisei to shōmetsu" [China-oriented organizations in Malaya: Their emergence, development, and demise], *Ajia keizai* 31, no. 12 (1990).
- 2 Wang Gungwu, "Chinese Politics in Malaya," *China Quarterly*, no. 43 (July–September 1970), pp. 4–5.
- 3 Wang Gungwu, pp. 17–18.
- 4 Edgar O'Ballance, *Malaya: The Communist Insurgent War, 1948–60* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), p. 62.
- 5 Victor Purcell, *The Chinese in Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 286–87.
- 6 See C. M. Turnbull, *A History of Singapore 1819–1975* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 229, 232; K. J. Ratman, *Communalism and the Political Process in Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1965), pp. 149–52; and Cheah See Kian, *Malaixiya huaren zhengzhi sichao yanbian* [Changes in the political thought of Malaysian Chinese] (Penang: Yunitra Enterprise, 1984), p. 33.
- 7 Khoo Kay Kim, and Adnan Hj. Nawang, *Darurat 1948–1960* [The emergency, 1948–1960] (Kuala Lumpur: Muzium Angkatan Tentera, 1984), p. 88.
- 8 See also Yeo Kim Wah, *Political Development in Singapore, 1945–1955* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1975), pp. 19, 229, 258–59, 280; Mohamed Noordin Sopiee, *From Malayan Union to Singapore Separation: Political Unification in the Malaysia Region 1945–65* (Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Universiti Malaya, 1974), p. 33.
- 9 Cheah See Kian, p. 33; Richard Stubbs, *Hearts and Minds in Guerrilla Warfare: The Malayan Emergency, 1948–1960* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 23.
- 10 See Yeo Kim Wah, pp. 125, 144. Anthony Short, *The Communist Insurrection in Malaya, 1948–1960* (London: Frederick Muller, 1975), pp. 254, 257, 269. On the other hand there is research outright refuting any loyalty on the part of Malayan

- Chinese to China: Michael R. Stenson, *Repression and Revolt: The Origins of the 1948 Communist Insurrection in Malaya and Singapore*, Southeast Asian Series, no. 10 (Athens, Ohio: Center for International Studies, Ohio University, 1969), p. 27. We may therefore conclude that Stenson is of an opinion similar to O'Ballance, 1966.
- 11 Mohamed N. Soviee, pp. 38, 49. Albert Lau expresses a similar viewpoint in his *The Malayan Union Controversy, 1942–1948* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 127.
  - 12 Cheah Boon Kheng, *Red Star over Malaya: Resistance and Social Conflict during and after the Japanese Occupation of Malaya, 1941–1946* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1983), p. 252.
  - 13 Cheah Boon Kheng, *The Masked Comrades: A Study of the Communist United Front in Malaya, 1945–48* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1979), p. 58.
  - 14 Stubbs, p. 50.
  - 15 Charles Gamba, *The Origins of Trade Unionism in Malaya: A Study in Colonial Labour Unrest* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 1962), pp. 372–73.
  - 16 Leong Yee Fong, “The Emergence and Demise of the Chinese Labour Movement in Colonial Malaya, 1930–1960,” photocopy (1993), p. 22.