

**THE ORIGINS OF THE SOCIALIST REVOLUTION IN  
SARAWAK (1945-1963)**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis uses new archival and oral sources to analyse the politics of Sarawak's early left-wing movement and its leaders between 1945 and 1963. Departing from previous studies, I argue that it was a literary revolution among the young rather than clandestine communist organisation that gave rise to the generation of revolution-minded young Chinese during the late 1940s and early 1950s. Through interviews with veterans, the thesis clarifies the underground processes that led to the founding of the Sarawak Liberation League in July 1953, the League's subsequent 'united front' politics, and its decision to take the 'armed struggle' route in December 1962. Against 'Chinese chauvinist' charges, I emphasize instead the *minzu*-nationalist vision of the 'united front' movement and argue that previous scholars have tended to neglect the League's *minzu*-nationalist identity in accounting for its success during the 'united front' years.

## **List of Abbreviations**

ABL	Anti British League
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CDL	China Democratic League
KMT	Kuo Min Tang
MCP	Malayan Communist Party
NCJP	Nan Chiau Jit Pau
NAA	The National Archives of Australia
OCPYA	Overseas Chinese Progressive Youth Association
PAP	People's Action Party
PRO	Public Record Office, London, Kew
SAYA	Sarawak Advanced Youth Association
SBPIR	Sarawak and Brunei Political Intelligence Report
SIT	Sarawak International Times
SLL	Sarawak Liberation League
SNDYL	Sarawak New Democratic Youth League
SSGS	(Kuching Chung Hwa Middle School) Students' Self-Governing Society
SUPP	Sarawak United People's Party
SOAS	London School of Oriental and African Studies
SWP	Sin Wen Pao
TNA	The National Archives, United Kingdom

## **A Note on Romanisation**

In this thesis, I have retained the Chinese dialect names of personalities and organizations as they were used in the contemporary English-language primary sources. The Chinese in Malaysia continue to preserve their dialect identities in the English transliteration of their names up to this day. In a few cases where I cannot trace the person's dialect name, I have had to seek recourse to *pinyin*. To avoid confusion, the Chinese characters of personalities and organizations are provided when they first appear. In order to be consistent, I have used the Wade-Giles system of transliteration for the well-known people and organizations of the time. Hence, Kuo Min Tang instead of Guo Min Dang and Chiang Kai-shek instead of Jiang Jieshi.

## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

Moments after news of the Brunei Revolt reached Lim Ho Kui's ears, his mind had been set on taking the revolution in Sarawak to the next phase of armed struggle. In December 1962, at the age of twenty-six, Lim Ho Kui, a Sarawak-born second generation Chinese, was the leader of at least one thousand other Chinese youths organised under the Sarawak Liberation League (SLL) – a Marxist-Leninist revolutionary organisation engaged in a nationalist liberation struggle for their adopted homeland Sarawak. That day, Lim put pen to paper and signed an order that was soon disseminated through secretly established channels to hundreds of cadres spread across the country. The message was for them to 'prepare for armed struggle',<sup>1</sup> which was declared in opposition to the impending formation of the state of Malaysia. Over the next twenty-seven years, SLL waged a guerrilla war against the withdrawing British Empire and the newly installed Malaysian government for the broadly framed goals of achieving Sarawak's national independence and a socialist revolution. How did a twenty-six year old second-generation migrant come to lead an armed communist revolution in this relatively isolated Southeast Asian country?

#### **1.1 Global Imperialism and the Making of Sarawak**

The state of Sarawak that entered into the young Chinese's consciousness as a natural end-goal for their quest for nationalist independence during the early 1950s was in fact a relatively new political entity. From the earliest times, human activity on the north coast of Borneo was centred on the river systems, which flow towards the China Sea from the island's great Northeast-Southwest mountain range. In general, people there lived in relative isolation of one another and were hence able to preserve their historical way of life until late in the twentieth century. A widely accepted, though grossly simplified, narrative of Sarawak's ethnographic history begins with the Penans and Punans, who are believed to be the earliest original inhabitants of the land. Until the 1960s, these tribal people continue to lead hunter-gather lifestyles in the forests and are believed to have been driven there from the coasts by later

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Lim Ho Kui, 7.3.2007.



migrants, probably the Kenyahs and Kayans. While the Kenyahs and Kayans are native to Borneo, they came from south of the watershed and have a higher propensity for warfare than the others. The Land Dayaks, noted for their traditional docility, were originally river dwellers close to present-day Kuching, but were driven to hill tops by the later migrants. Also living by the river were the Ibans (also known as Sea Dayaks), who loved war and were frequently involved in ‘piracy’. They form the largest ethnic group in Sarawak today, but their numbers only increased with their mass migration from central Borneo from the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> By and large, these indigenous peoples of Borneo practised shifting agriculture, lived in longhouses and were highly egalitarian in their social organization. They were animists, who took their enemies’ heads for spiritual gratification.<sup>3</sup>

It was the coastal Malays who first imposed a state on these peoples of northern Borneo. From the fifteenth century, the Brunei Sultan – a Malay-Muslim raja (king) – dominated the northern littoral of the Borneo Island. The Bruneians trace their ancestral lineage to the great Johor sultanate. In theory, the raja, as God’s representative on earth, ruled spiritually as the physical embodiment of the state, while temporal affairs were run with the nobility centred around the Sultan’s court. As in the case of other Southeast Asian maritime states during the Age of Commerce, the key to power and wealth lay in the state’s ability to attract, safeguard and tax Chinese, Indian, Arabic and European traders.<sup>4</sup> The state, in turn, collaborated with groups of pagan people, from whom they collected tax and occasionally levied military service. At its peak in the sixteenth century, Brunei, on its seat of power in the Brunei Bay commanded a string of ports that linked Manila in the north to Banjarmasin on the south coast of Borneo.<sup>5</sup> ‘Sarawak’ was a province of Brunei that took its name from the first major river system west of Tanjong (Cape) Datu on the north-western corner of Borneo.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Pringle, *Rajah and Rebels: The Ibans of Sarawak under Brooke Rule, 1841-1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), pp. 247-82.

<sup>3</sup> Steve Runciman, *The White Rajahs, A History of Sarawak from 1841 to 1946* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), Chapter 1.

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, Volume 2, Expansion and Crisis* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Graham Saunders, *A History of Brunei* (London: Routledge, 2002 [1994]), pp. 35-48.

The founding of modern Sarawak in 1841 can be traced to historical processes that began to unravel in the mid-eighteenth century: Britain's Industrial Revolution, the rise of the doctrine of free trade, Britain's desire to break open the China market, and the increasing willingness of Western powers to annex territorial colonies and govern native peoples directly. Beginning in India, then spreading across the crescent arc of the Indian Ocean, the British coerced, defeated and replaced Islamic regimes and attained their 'imperial meridian' by the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> In Southeast Asia, the British were at first mainly interested in securing the maritime trade route to China, along which lay the narrow Straits of Malacca – a strategic bottleneck. To this end, the colony of the Straits Settlements was founded in 1826 following the successive acquisitions of Penang (1786), Singapore (1819) and Malacca (1824) from the local Malay sultans and the Dutch (for Malacca). James Brooke, a British adventurer, was driven by the same set of motivations – a desire to secure an alternative trade route to China and end piracy in the North Bornean waters – when he intervened in Brunei politics and wrenched the province of Sarawak from Brunei rule. Yet Sarawak had neither the strategic positioning nor the natural resources to induce Britain's formal colonisation despite James Brookes' intense lobbying. Shunned by the British, the White Rajah dynasty would rule Sarawak themselves for a hundred years.<sup>7</sup>

Brooke rule laid the foundations of Sarawak's modern state, economy and society. The Brookes pacified the Iban 'piracy problem' on the frontier river systems and obtained successive 'treaties' from Brunei to rule over larger and larger tracts of territory. At the expense of Brunei's sovereignty, the Brooke state expanded eastwards river by river – the Sarawak river (1841); Sadong, Lupar, Saribas and Krian (1853); Rejang, Oya, Mukah and Bintulu (1863); Niah and Baram (1882); Trusan (1884); Limbang (1890); and Lawas (1905) – to reach its present boundaries.<sup>8</sup> The Brookes ruled ostensibly as Malay princes with absolute power: they sought to preserve the indigenous way of life, used local (rather than Bruneian or Arab) Malay

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<sup>6</sup> Chris Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World* (London: Longman, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> Runciman, *White Rajahs*, pp. 56-156. Pringle, *Rajah and Rebels*, pp. 99-100.

<sup>8</sup> The acquisition of Limbang river in 1890 was the most controversial – it split Brunei into two non-contiguous halves. Brunei itself would have been encroached if not for the intervention of the British Colonial Office. See Runciman, *White Rajahs*, pp. 194-201.

chiefs as administrators and mobilized the Ibans for warfare.<sup>9</sup> Yet in other ways too, the nature of the state was fundamentally altered. A formal state bureaucracy gradually emerged with the introduction of an elite class of European administrators – the Sarawak Administrative Service. The state was split into five administrative ‘Divisions’, which was further broken down into ‘districts’.<sup>10</sup> The hitherto erratic collection of the annual fixed tax on the Malay ‘head’ (individual) and the Iban ‘bilik’ (household) was regularized. From 1855, the first raja (r. 1841 – 1867) ruled with the assistance of a ‘Supreme Council’ of European and Malay advisors. Then in 1867, the second raja (Charles Brooke, r. 1867 – 1917) convened the ‘Council Negri’, a triennial assembly of the state’s European officers and indigenous leaders, as a symbol of the unity of the state and its peoples. These two councils represented the monarch’s highest executive and legislative bodies, while constitutional reforms imposed checks against the personal rule of the third raja (Charles Vyner Brooke, r. 1917 – 1941). Internally, the state’s security was maintained by the police (mainly Malay) and the para-military Sarawak Rangers (mainly Iban). Externally, Sarawak came under formal British ‘protection’ from 1888.<sup>11</sup>

The Brookes wished to create a thriving economy in Sarawak by selling its minerals and cash crops, but unlike other European colonizers, they wanted, at least in theory, to achieve this with minimal European capital investment and the smallest possible change to the native way of life. While the mining of minerals was the sole sector the Brookes were prepared to open to Western capital, unfortunately, only insignificant amounts of coal (at Simunjan, Silantek and Muara) and oil (Miri) was discovered.<sup>12</sup> The Brookes also did not have sufficient political and financial will, despite their professed aims to do so, to convert the indigenous peoples from shifting cultivation to cash crop agriculture.<sup>13</sup> Brooke reluctance to introduce Western capital and to ‘reform’ native culture meant that more so than other forms of colonial

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<sup>9</sup> Pringle, *Rajahs and Rebels*, p. 329.

<sup>10</sup> These administrative ‘Divisions’ were determined, by and large, by the stages of state’s historical expansion. First Division – Rivers Sarawak and Sadong; Second Division – Lupar, Maru, Kalaka; Third Division – Rejang, Matu, Oya, Mukah, Bintulu; Fourth Division – Niah and Baram; Fifth Division – Limbang, Trusan and Lawas.

<sup>11</sup> Bob Reece, *The Name of Brooke: the end of White Rajah rule in Sarawak* (KL: OUP, 1982), pp. 1-12.

<sup>12</sup> Ooi Keat Gin, *Of Free Trade and Native Interests: The Brookes and the Economic Development of Sarawak, 1841-1941* (KL: Oxford University Press, 1997), Chapter 4.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 5.

government in Southeast Asia, Sarawak came to rely on Chinese migrant traders, labour and agriculturists for the state's economic development. With the exception of oil, the state's major export items throughout the century of Brooke rule – sago, jungle produce, antimony, quicksilver, pepper, rubber, gold and gambier – were mainly owned by Chinese interests. The rubber boom of the early the twentieth century were the golden years of Sarawak's economy, which saw the state's export revenue rose from consistently below \$10 million in the first decade to \$60 million in 1929.<sup>14</sup>

While colonial governments worldwide centralized their administrations, devolved power to the colonised and started to provide social services in the first decades of the twentieth century, Brooke rule remained personal, paternalistic and minimalist to the end. The economic boom of the pre-Depression years and the subsequent slump of the 1930s indicated that Sarawak was already an integral state within the global economy and international system by the early twentieth century. By the 1930s, the anachronism of preserving the native way of life at all costs was becoming apparent. This was revealed most palpably in the lack of colonial education. In 1937, a government survey of Sarawak's education system by a seconded Malayan official was highly critical of the non-existence of state-funded education for the non-Malay native peoples and the unimaginative and deficient system of schools for Malays. The report pointed out that while most Crown Colonies spent between 7% and 12% of their annual revenue on education, Sarawak was spending 2% to 5%.<sup>15</sup> While the government ran schools for Malays to train them for administrative posts, the education of the Ibans, Land Dayaks and other indigenous peoples were left entirely to the Christian missions. The Chinese community paid for their own privately-funded school system, giving rise to the educational disparity between the Chinese and other peoples. Of the 14,000 students enrolled in all Sarawak schools in 1936, three-quarters were Chinese in independent Chinese and mission schools.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> These were the Straits dollars, \$8.57 of which was pegged to one sterling pound from 1906. This rate of exchange was generally maintained until 1941. For export value and numbers, see Ooi, *Of Free Trade and Native Interests*, pp. xxiv and 90-3. To be more precise, the boom years were between 1910 and 1920, the late 1920s and the late 1930s. See Craig Lockard, *From Kampung to City, A Social History of Kuching Malaysia, 1820 – 1970* (Ohio: Center for International Studies Ohio University, 1987), p. 86.

<sup>15</sup> 'Hammond Report on Education', p. 84.

<sup>16</sup> Pringle, *Rajahs and Rebels*, p. 339.

The moral dilemmas of the Brooke authority translated into a series of internal political crises during the 1930s that brought the state to the brink of collapse. First, the uncertain constitutional future of the state was exacerbated by a family feud amongst the Brookes. Charles Vyner Brooke, who had no male issue, wavered between passing the kingship to the rightful heir (his nephew) and divesting the state to a European administrative oligarchy in exchange for a life-long endowment. Second, the European officers of the administration were split between Brooke loyalists who wanted to retain the personal and ad-hoc nature of governance and a new breed who wanted to centralize the bureaucracy and rationalize the state's system of justice.<sup>17</sup> While the British Colonial Office could have intervened, throughout the 1930s, they were satisfied stay on the sidelines.<sup>18</sup> In October 1941, at the centennial anniversary of Brooke rule, an inconclusive compromise was reached between the raja and his administrators in the form of the nine 'Cardinal Principles' constitution: 1) the administration paid the raja \$2,000,000 for the surrender of his absolute powers to constitutional checks, 2) in exchange for which the European administrative oligarchy kept their jobs and independence from the British, and 3) the people were guaranteed the improvement of social and education services and the eventual self-government of Sarawak.<sup>19</sup> The Japanese invasion would upset the pace of Sarawak's constitutional reforms.

## 1.2 The Chinese in Sarawak

The political, economic and social structures with and around which the Chinese in Sarawak negotiated their daily lives had much to do with the prevailing patterns of modern Chinese migration. Chinese migrants were pushed out of their homeland by China's deteriorating population-to-land ratio over the two centuries from 1650, when population trebled to 380 million in the 1850s while arable land merely doubled. Exporting its male labour was one of the last resorts the family – as

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<sup>17</sup> Reece, *Name of Brooke*, pp. 40-93.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 94-127.

<sup>19</sup> Reece, *Name of Brooke*, pp. 80-1. The looming Japanese invasion gave the whole affair an air of farce, which was reinforced by the raja's flight to Australia within two days of the constitution's proclamation. To the credit of the European administrative oligarchy, they stood their ground when the Japanese invaded. C. D. Le Gros Clarke, the Chief Secretary, refused to flee Sarawak, was interned by the Japanese and summarily executed towards the end of the war.

the basic unit of Chinese economic organisation – could and did take.<sup>20</sup> As a familial strategy of survival, the male migrant was expected to contribute to the livelihood of the family, and eventually to return and perpetuate the family line. Such a migrant was always more of a sojourner (*huaqiao*) than a permanent settler. To the sojourner, the native-place was an important identity marker, which banded them together in the venue society for ‘security, business cooperation and moral support’.<sup>21</sup> The Chinese living on the southern provinces of Fujian and Guangdong had an almost two thousand-year history of maritime trading contacts with the peoples of *Nanyang* (literally, the South Seas, i.e. today’s Southeast Asia).<sup>22</sup> Navigating the China Sea was hence not a new endeavour for them though it took the opening of foreign treaty ports in China and the European colonisation of territorial Southeast Asia in the mid-nineteenth century to really trigger their large-scale seaward migration. In one hundred years, between ten and sixteen million Overseas Chinese sojourned in Southeast Asia.<sup>23</sup>

Economic motivations and opportunities mediated through compatriot networks combined to determine the settlement patterns and occupational orientations of the Chinese sojourners across Southeast Asia. Five major speech groups dominated the migration traffic: the Hokkien (*Minnan*) of Southern Fujian around the port of Xiamen (or Amoy), Cantonese (*Guangfu*) of the Pearl River Delta, Teochew of the Han River Delta in Northeast Guangdong, Hakka (*Kejia*) of the mountainous regions of the two provinces and Hailam (*Hainan*) of the Hainan Island.<sup>24</sup> In 1841, it was estimated that there were 1,000 Chinese in Sarawak. The first to arrive were Hakka gold-miners,<sup>25</sup> who crossed the watershed from West Borneo to mine new-found gold at Bau on the Sarawak River in the 1840s. Hokkien and Teochew merchants, who had already established trading concerns in Singapore, extended their business networks

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<sup>20</sup> Philip Kuhn, *Chinese Among Others, Emigration in Modern Times* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008), pp. 13-4.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 43-6.

<sup>22</sup> Wang Gungwu, *The Nanhai Trade, Early Chinese Trade in the South China Sea* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2003 [1958]).

<sup>23</sup> For a recent study that sets Chinese migration abroad in a global context, see Adam Mckeown, ‘Global Migration, 1846-1940’ in *Journal of World History*, Vol. 15, No. 2, pp. 155-189. Mckeown shows that both Chinese and Indian long-distance migration during the period equaled European transatlantic migration, both in terms of volume and economic impact on recipient territories.

<sup>24</sup> Kuhn, *Chinese Among Others*, pp. 33-43.

<sup>25</sup> They were already mining gold in West Borneo since the mid-eighteenth century. See Wang Tai Peng, *The Origins of Chinese Kongsi* (Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 1994 [1977]).

to Kuching after Brooke rule was instituted. From 1901, the Brooke government contracted Foochows (Fuzhou) of Northern Fujian and some Cantonese to colonise the Rejang Delta in the Third Division with padi fields. By 1909, a government census counted 45,000 Chinese, or one-tenth of total population. The next twenty years were the rubber boom era, during which the majority of Chinese agriculturists, especially the Foochows in the Rejang valley, converted from padi to rubber cultivation. Those years saw a net increase in Chinese immigration so that by 1939, the Chinese population had increased threefold to 124,000 or one-fourth (25.5%) of Sarawak's population.<sup>26</sup>

The ethnic Chinese revolutionaries of post-war Sarawak were the children of the rubber boom migrants. Born in the 1930s, most of them lived through the end of Brooke rule, the Japanese Occupation and British colonialism. Their 'socialist revolution' of the 1950s was aimed as much to break down the colonial society into which they were born as to build a new and more equitable post-colonial society. As indicated above, the Chinese in pre-war Sarawak were segregated by their economic niches. In the commercialized colonial society, social status and political leadership within each sub-ethnic community was determined by wealth. Native-place associations, such as the Hokkien and Teochew associations, provided welfare services (temple services, funeral, poverty aid) to their compatriots. The Brookes in turn appointed the wealthiest *towkays* (merchants in Chinese) from these associations to be 'kapitans china' to represent their respective speech-group communities in government. Below the *towkay* leaders in the social hierarchy were the middle-level merchants, English-educated civil servants and the intelligentsia who formed the 'middle class' of the society. The 'working class' included small traders, artisans, shop assistants, hawkers and labourers.<sup>27</sup> Brooke patronage of the Chinese *towkay* leaders served to consolidate their positions at the apex of Sarawak economy and society. The leadership of the Hokkien and Teochew communities, for example, remained in the Ong Ewe Hai and Law Kian Huat families respectively for the entire

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<sup>26</sup> No census was taken between 1909 and 1939, but it can easily be inferred that the majority of the population increase was gained before the Great Depression of 1929. After 1929, Sarawak, like other European colonial states, stopped accepting new migrants from China. See Craig Lockard, *Chinese Immigration and Society in Sarawak, 1868-1917* (Sibu: Sarawak Chinese Cultural Association, 2003), pp. 65-104.

<sup>27</sup> Lockard, *Social History of Kuching*, pp. 70-1.

length of Brooke rule. The extended Ong family in particular ran a business empire that ranged from sago milling to the highly lucrative Bian Chiang Bank.<sup>28</sup>

The Sarawak Chinese remained relatively innocent in politics compared to their counterparts in the rest of Southeast Asia. The extension of Chinese political party networks across Southeast Asia left Sarawak unscathed. By 1926, the Chinese Kuomintang (KMT) had set up some three hundred chapters in Burma, French Indochina, British Malaya, the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia), the Philippines and Thailand, with a 31,000-strong membership that doubled in eight years.<sup>29</sup> In Kuching, a small KMT chapter was set up but it was mostly inactive by the 1930s. The Chinese in Sarawak appear to have been less nationalistic than other Chinese in Southeast Asia. The most obvious sign of the Sarawak Chinese detachment from Chinese nationalism is the persistence of speech-group parochialism in the education system. Unlike in Singapore and Malaya, where Chinese schools began to teach in *Guoyu* (the Chinese national language, Mandarin) from the 1920s, Sarawak's Chinese schools continued to teach in their respective dialects.<sup>30</sup> It was only as the Sino-Japanese war escalated after 1937 that political interest in China grew and the various sub-groups set aside their differences to form a cross-dialect China Relief Fund chapter in Sarawak.<sup>31</sup> Until the Second World War, the Chinese in Sarawak were far from seeing themselves as one community.

### **1.3 War, Nationalism, Decolonization**

The Japanese invasion and subsequent occupation of Southeast Asia shattered the myth of European racial superiority and ended the political legitimacy of European empires. The British, who were responsible for Sarawak's defence since the 1888 treaty, put up a token form of defence. The Japanese were hence able to invade Sarawak with minimal fighting and occupied the territory between December 1941

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>29</sup> Yoji Akashi, *The Nanyang Chinese National Salvation Movement, 1937-1941* (New York: Center for East Asian Studies, University of Kansas, 1970), pp. 6-8.

<sup>30</sup> Lockard, *Social History of Kuching*, p. 123. See also Ooi Keat Gin, 'Chinese Vernacular Education in Sarawak During Brooke Rule 1841-1946' in *Modern Asian Studies*, 28, no. pt.3, 1994, pp. 503-31.

<sup>31</sup> Lockard, *Social History of Kuching*, p. 129.



and September 1945.<sup>32</sup> Like elsewhere in Southeast Asia, the Chinese community bore the brunt of Japanese colonial rule for their support of the China Relief Fund. During the occupation, some Chinese in the First Division organised an Anti-Fascist League – an underground resistance movement – though they limited themselves to operations aimed at relieving the people’s hardships (See Chapter 2.1). No general massacre of the Chinese like the ‘Sook Ching Movement’ of Singapore took place in Sarawak. General Malay collaboration with the Japanese caused bitter communal clashes between the Chinese and Malays in the immediate aftermath of the war. Overall, the war had the effect of greatly increasing the appeal of Chinese nationalism to the Chinese in Sarawak.<sup>33</sup>

War exposed the anachronism and fragility of the Brooke family’s dynastic rule in Sarawak and set in train a process of modernisation and rationalisation of the state to prepare the people for eventual independence. At the end of war, the hefty cost of the Australian military re-occupation, the advanced age of the raja and his distrust of his nephew, the heir, persuaded Charles Vyner Brooke to cede Sarawak to the British Colonial Office for a financial settlement of £100,000. For the British, the strategic significance of Sarawak and Brunei oil and the general threat of Indonesian nationalism and American anti-colonial sentiments to British imperial interests in Southeast Asia called for rapid intervention.<sup>34</sup> In February 1946, the Colonial Office announced the case for cession and within three months, the approval of ‘local opinion’ was obtained when pro-cession motions were passed with slim minorities in both the Council Negri and Supreme Council.<sup>35</sup> The Malay aristocracy, which had been favoured by the Brooke regime, was divided between pro and anti-cession factions. The anti-cession campaign developed into a proto-nationalist movement when members of the Malay elite (Malay National Union), some educated Dayaks (Sarawak Dayak Association) and the left-wing Chinese intelligentsia (see Chapter 2.1) opposed the strong arm tactics of British and campaigned for the return of the raja. However, the neglect of education and the resultant lack of political awareness, especially among the non-Malay indigenous peoples, precluded the mobilization of an

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<sup>32</sup> Bob Reece, *Masa Jepun, Sarawak under the Japanese, 1941-1945*, (Kuching: Sarawak Literary Society, 1998).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

<sup>34</sup> Reece, *Name of Brooke*, pp. 193-4.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 198-245.

organisation on a scale akin to the United Malays National Organisation in Malaya to oppose British constitutional impositions. Nonetheless, the movement lingered on among the Malays and only petered out after the assassination of the Sarawak British governor in 1949 prompted severe repression.<sup>36</sup>

British colonial rule in Sarawak lasted between July 1946 and September 1963. The British obtained the mandate for colonial rule by promising to develop Sarawak and prepare its people for independence as promised by the 1941 Nine Principle Constitution. Broadly speaking, the sixteen years of British colonial rule in Sarawak can be divided into three phases.<sup>37</sup> 1946 to 1953 was the reconstruction phase, when the colonial government was preoccupied with the restoration of the basic infrastructure of Sarawak after three years of destruction and neglect. 1953 to 1959 can be characterised as the development phase, during which more funds were devoted to the expansion of Sarawak's economy and the increased provision of social services in education, health and housing to the people. The final phase – 1959 to 1963 – were four heady years of when constitutional reforms from the top were met with political activism from below: political parties were formed, local leaders were given the first taste of self-government, and the debate on Sarawak's future in the constitutional design of 'Malaysia' caused deep divisions among the people.

Political developments in Sarawak need also be read in the context of global developments. As the Cold War between the Soviet-led Communist bloc and the American spearheaded 'free world' intensified in 1948, the Americans were increasingly willing to tone down their anti-colonial expectations with respect to their Western European allies and appreciate the anti-Communist effect of European colonial rule in Afro-Asian countries.<sup>38</sup> The simultaneous outbreak of communist uprisings in Malaya, Indonesia, the Philippines and Burma and the 'loss' of China to communism in 1949 made Asia the critical arena, where the balance of power in the Cold War might be tipped either way. The West showed its determination to contain the 'domino effect' of communism in Asia in the Korea (1950-4) and Vietnam Wars (1950-75). The long-term British goal was to create a solid pro-British and anti-

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., pp. 246-83.

<sup>37</sup> Vernon Porritt, *British Colonial Rule in Sarawak, 1946-1963* (KL: OUP, 1997), pp. 1-7.

<sup>38</sup> Matthew Jones, *Conflict and Confrontation in Southeast Asia, 1961-1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 1-28.

Communist state from its Southeast Asian colonies (Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak, Brunei and North Borneo), which culminated in the formation of 'Malaysia' in September 1963. This intent was most clearly expressed in the creation of the position of the British Commissioner-General of Southeast Asia in 1948<sup>39</sup> and the Southeast Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO) in 1954. In Southeast Asian Cold War politics, there was also the additional element of the suspect political loyalty of the ten-million strong Chinese diaspora.<sup>40</sup> Committing the hearts and minds of the Chinese in Sarawak to the British liberal-democratic outlook of the world hence was a central challenge to British colonial policy.

#### **1.4 Interpreting the Revolution: Communism, Nationalism and Leadership**

The history of communism in Sarawak can be divided broadly into four phases: 1) Between 1945 and 1953, some left-wing Chinese intelligentsia – journalists and teachers – challenged the traditional authority of the community's merchant leaders and attracted a strong following among Chinese school students. 2) From 1953 to 1963, these young Chinese founded the first Sarawak-oriented underground communist revolutionary organisation – the Sarawak Liberation League (henceforth, SLL) – and created a united front of students, workers, peasants and a political party to agitate for Sarawak's national independence through constitutional means. 3) For ten years after 1963, the Sarawak Liberation League fought a guerrilla war against the 'neo-colonial' setup of Malaysia in the forests of Kalimantan. Between 1963 and 1966, they allied with Brunei's Party Rakyat to form the state of North Kalimantan, with the support of Indonesia and China. 4) 1973 – 1990 were years of rapid decline after the majority of the guerrilla fighters left the jungles in the Sri Aman peace accords of 1973. The last remnants of the movement gave up their armed struggle in 1990 after the collapse of the communist bloc in 1989. This thesis examines the origins of the revolution during its first two phases.

The origins and nature of the Sarawak Liberation League and its revolutionary goal were first published in Tim Hardy's *The Danger Within: A History of the*

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<sup>39</sup> Peter Lyon, 'MacDonald, Malcolm John (1901–1981)', Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn., May 2008.

<sup>40</sup> For a contemporary view, see C.P. Fitzgerald, *The Third China: the Chinese communities in South-East Asia* (Singapore: D. Moore, 1969).

*Clandestine Communist Organisation in Sarawak.*<sup>41</sup> The author was the Deputy Head of the Sarawak Special Branch (the domestic intelligence agency) and had full access to captured communist documents.<sup>42</sup> The communist movement's political goal was 'the establishment of a new democratic society, then a socialist society and finally a communist society' in Sarawak.<sup>43</sup> The main thrust of Hardy's argument lies in its exposure of this tight knit communist outfit and to prove that the broad 'united front' of left-wing political parties, trade unions, farmers' associations, student bodies were in fact controlled by the underground communist movement. Why and how did SLL become a serious political contender and a potent security threat in 1963? Hardy's answer lies in the *modus operandi* of the revolutionary organisation – its political goal, organisation, training methods, security measures, propaganda strategy and their work among the native. In this thesis, I argue that though important, communist thought and the highly efficient underground organisation were not the determining factors in accounting for the success of SLL in its first two phases of development. Hardy's emphasis on communist thought and organisation was made at the expense of analysing the movement's social context and the influence of personalities on the outcome of events. His insensitivity to the social roots of the revolution is most evident in his reading of the movement's connection with the Chinese community:

The CCO [Clandestine Communist Organisation] is 100 per cent Chinese in make up but it cannot be emphasised too often that this does not indicate that all or even many Chinese in Sarawak are communists...Nevertheless the non-communist majority does bear some measure of responsibility for the serious state of affairs that exists.<sup>44</sup>

Exactly what responsibility the Chinese community should bear was addressed, to some extent, by Justus van der Kroef in a scholarly article published a year later. In 'Communism and Communalism in Sarawak', van der Kroef argues that it was not so much the long-term desire to set up a communist society as the championing of

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<sup>41</sup> Tim Hardy, *The Danger Within: A History of the Clandestine Communist Organisation in Sarawak* (Kuching: Sarawak Information Service, 1963).

<sup>42</sup> Tim Hardy, *A Solipsist Monogatory: The Memoirs of Tim Hardy* (unpublished manuscript, 2005), p. 149.

<sup>43</sup> Hardy, *Danger Within*, p. 4.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

Chinese communal interests that made communism such a powerful force in Sarawak politics.<sup>45</sup> While it is true that the communist movement defended Chinese education against colonial ‘national’ education reforms during the early 1960s, to suggest that these moves were made to exploit Chinese communalism for the ultimate interests of the communists is to take colonial propaganda at face value and to deny the communists the possibility of a legitimate nationalist vision for post-colonial Sarawak. Van der Kroef’s total reliance on English language sources, particularly the colonial news publications *Sarawak by the Week* and the *Sarawak Gazette*, may in part explain this bias.

But the misreading also stems from the author’s uncritical agreement with the colonial government’s imposition of the Western concept of the ‘nation’ on the Chinese community in Sarawak. The Western notion of the ‘nation’ as a political community of people conscious of their common territorial boundaries, culture, language and historical experience was produced by the historical contingency of the rise of the competitive state system and capitalism in sixteenth century Europe. The post-World War Two colonial policy of nation-building in Sarawak was premised on an education system that would produce this ‘nation’ of liberal-democratic English-speaking citizens among the diverse groups of people.<sup>46</sup> Chinese educationists and left-wing leaders, however, argued for the right of each community to retain its *minzu* (民族) education. From the vantage point of state power, the Chinese refusal to assimilate into a common culture was easily perceived as a form of cultural or even racial chauvinism. This is reflected in contemporary writers’ translation of the Chinese term *minzu* as either ‘national’ or ‘racial’. For example, both Tim Hardy and Justus van der Kroef quote the same communist document on education, which claims that ‘the Conversion Plan seriously conflicts with **racial** concepts of the Chinese people’.<sup>47</sup> In another instance, the *minzu* work department in the Sarawak Liberation League was translated as the ‘racial work’ department.<sup>48</sup> In the western conception of

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<sup>45</sup> Justus van der Kroef, ‘Communism and Chinese Communalism in Sarawak’ in *The China Quarterly*, no. 20 (Oct. – Dec., 1964), pp. 38-66.

<sup>46</sup> Ooi Keat Gin, *World Beyond the Rivers: Education in Sarawak from Brooke Rule to Colonial Office Administration 1841-1963* (Hull: Department of South-East Asian Studies, University of Hull, 1996), p. 111.

<sup>47</sup> Van der Kroef, ‘Communism and Chinese Communalism’, p. 57, quoted from *North Borneo News* and *Sabah Times*, 4.12.1962; Hardy, *Danger Within*, p. 24.

<sup>48</sup> Hardy, *Danger Within*, p. 6.

the nation, this would imply the adoption of one culture to the exclusion of others within a political community. Did *minzu*, as the communists used it, carry the same connotation of racial superiority and cultural exclusivity as contemporary writers seem to have implied?

Given the vehemence of the Chinese resistance to linguistic assimilation, it may seem specious to suggest otherwise. However, historian Tan Liok Ee has argued that the use of *minzu* as a concept of community by the Chinese educationists in Malaya in the 1950s was based on the ‘conception of equal [component] *minzu*, in the plural, within a single nation [*guojia*, 国家]’.<sup>49</sup> To be sure, Tan admits, the ‘emphasis on culture was due, in part, to the special pride of belonging to an ancient and glorious culture’.<sup>50</sup> But the principle of parity among the three component *minzu* (Malay, Indian and Chinese) was far from an expedient disguise for feelings of racial superiority among the Chinese. Rather, as Tan demonstrates, it had a well-established precedent in modern Chinese political thought, which the Chinese in Malaya adapted to their situation. Faced with the reality of a multi-ethnic state, modern Chinese thinkers quickly abandoned Han ethnic as the legitimizing criterion for the constitution of the Chinese nation after the success of the anti-Manchu 1911 revolution. Tan argues that the notion of *minzu*, which the Malayan Chinese inherited, implied first the ‘dominance of Chinese culturalism rather than ethnic Han chauvinism’; and second, ‘a concept of cultural community ... systemically distinguished from *guojia* as nation in a territorial and political sense’.<sup>51</sup>

A central thesis of this work is to restore to *minzu* its authentic intellectual meaning within Sarawak communist thought. To the Chinese-educated in Sarawak, translating *minzu* as race, nation or community will not convey the full sense of its meaning. Instead, *minzu* is best understood as **the conception of discrete cultural communities subsumed equitably under the nation**. As mentioned above, the Chinese in post-war Sarawak were still rife with speech-group, occupational and class divisions. One of the first aims of the left-wing intelligentsia and young radicals after

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<sup>49</sup> Tan Liok Ee, ‘The Rhetoric of *Bangsa* and *Minzu*: Community and Nation in Tension, the Malay Peninsula, 1900-1955’, Working Paper 52, The Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1988, p. 28.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 25-6.

the war was to forge a *minzu* among the Chinese in Sarawak through creating new socio-political institutions that cut across those divisions. Their efforts in building a Chinese *minzu* in the early post-war years are discussed in Chapter Two. But I argue, in Chapter Four, that it was only after August 1956, with the publication of the communist-controlled newspaper *Sin Wen Pau* that the notion of the Sarawak nation as a tripartite *minzu* alliance of the Chinese, Malay and Dayak peoples began to emerge in communist rhetoric. The circulation of the newspaper, as Benedict Anderson contends, helped to create the ‘imagined community’ of the Sarawak Chinese *minzu*-nation. Chapter Four argues that the spread of this *minzu*-nationalist idea between 1956 and 1959 prepared the ground for a mass movement, which explains the rapid mobilization of the Chinese grassroots when the Sarawak United People’s Party (SUPP) branches expanded across the country between 1959 and 1961. *Minzu* served to unite the Chinese community towards the nation of Sarawak peoples; it explains why Sarawak’s native peoples made up almost half of SUPP’s early membership.<sup>52</sup>

Communist organisation and *minzu*-nationalism, rather than communalism, combine to mobilise a formidable opposition to the colonial government in the latter half of the period under study. Due to the clandestine nature of the movement, Hardy and Van der Kroef were, however, unable to say much about the personalities and politics behind Sarawak communist leadership and how they influenced the course of events. Douglas Hyde’s *The Roots of Guerrilla Warfare* and Vernon Porritt’s recent monograph on Sarawak communism shed more light on communist leadership but the former’s reliance on mainly colonial intelligence sources and the latter on additional open English-language sources necessarily obscure the personalities and their roles behind the movement.<sup>53</sup>

To analyse how the Sarawak communist leadership influenced the course of historical events, it is imperative to lay out the patterns of leadership over the period. Between 1949 and 1953, radical left were split between the China and Sarawak-oriented factions. The latter emerged in 1953 to form the SLL, whose leadership was

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<sup>52</sup> See Chapter 4.3. Interestingly, the use of the word *zhongzu* (race), as far as I can trace it, only began to creep into Sarawak leftist discourse in the period 1960-61. See *Min Chong Pao* on 18.1.1961.

<sup>53</sup> Douglas Hyde, *The roots of guerrilla warfare* (London, Sydney: Bodley Head, 1968); Vernon Porritt, *The Rise and Fall of Communism in Sarawak, 1940-1990* (Clayton: Monash Asia Institute, 2004).

guided by the communist theory of democratic-centralisation – ‘the minority obedient to the majority, the subordinate obedient to the superior, the individual obedient to the collective body, the sections obedient to the central authorities’.<sup>54</sup> A central committee of sorts existed throughout the period. This was expanded from a duumvirate at the founding of SLL July 1953 to a six-person committee by 1957. Chapter Three discusses how this communist leadership emerged through the conduct of two student strikes in the Kuching Chung Hwa Middle School in 1951 and 1955. Chapter 4.1 shows that there was a clear two-tier division of labour between this six-person communist leadership, i.e. each member was put in charge of a particular branch of the ‘united front’ [trade unions, peasant association, student movement, *minzu* works, the political party] and the work of one of Sarawak’s five administrative divisions [North Borneo formed the sixth administrative division]. While the six people formed a central committee in theory, even the leadership of this committee turned out to be highly personal and hierarchical. In practice, there was no routine meeting of the committee to discuss major policy issues.<sup>55</sup> Events proved that leadership at the centre and at the top invariably prevailed over the majority and the collective.

## 1.5 Sources and Methodology

The foremost challenge involved in writing the history of a clandestine movement is the paucity of written sources, and in the Sarawak case, their control by the government. Yet historians relish such challenges. In this work, I have made use of three sets of sources to address some of the historiographical gaps identified in the previous section. The first consists of colonial records. These include the official Colonial Office correspondence stored at the Public Records Office in London, personal papers of ex-colonial officials deposited with the Rhodes House Library, Oxford and the School of Oriental and African Studies, London and the Sarawak colonial government’s published annual reports and censuses. While the narrative draws extensively from one particular set of monthly ‘Sarawak and Brunei Political Intelligence Reports’ (1948-1956), these sources are not used without discrimination. I am aware that much that goes into these reports, in the nature of all intelligence

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<sup>54</sup> Hardy, *Danger Within*, p. 7.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with Lim Ho Kui, 7.3.2007.



work, is politically biased. Hence, I have only quoted from them either if the information corroborates with other third-party sources or if they generally fall in line with the logic of contiguous events. By and large, the local intelligence committee did get its assessments correct.

The second set is a wide variety of Chinese language sources, which are of varying standards of reliability. For the earlier period (1945-1952), the mining of contemporary Chinese newspapers in Singapore and Sarawak have produced some nuggets of key information about the nature of Chinese society in Sarawak during those years. A set of left-wing newspapers, political party and trade unions publications are available, but as all open sources of the time go, they hardly reveal the calculations of SLL's top leaders within their inner chambers. Nonetheless, upon closer reading of the editorials, many of them written by Wen Ming Chyuan, editor of *Sin Wen Pau* and the Education and Propaganda Secretary of SUPP, reveal that the top leader's broad strategy was often conveyed through these open publications, albeit in much dress-downed Communist language. Memoirs of former activists have also started to roll off the press in recent years and they have been useful for providing personal insights into the events of the time. For instance, the memoirs of Chan Siaw Hee, a militant leftist who was not a member of SLL, reveals a lot that is previously unknown about his ex-colleagues and adversaries.<sup>56</sup> The Sibü Friendship Association, a social club for ex-Communist comrades, has published a series of booklets, in which remnant documents and oral histories are recorded. Finally, *Sarawak International Times (SIT)* feature writer Li Zhenyuan published a series of sixty-three articles about Sarawak politics during its times of crisis between June and September 2006. Though written without scholarly apparatus, these articles have proved highly informative to this exercise. Unlike other scholarly works which are based predominantly on English language sources, the use of Chinese language sources restores authenticity to the voice of the protagonists of the history.

The final and most valuable set of sources is a series of twenty-four oral interviews granted to me by the former leaders of SLL and its satellite the SAYA. These interviews were conducted between January and March 2007. To protect the

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<sup>56</sup> Chan, *A Memoir*.

privacy of the informants and to ensure the accuracy of the recording, I have offered to produce transcripts, which all the interviewees have read, amended and approved for my use in this thesis. They include two of the five surviving members of the Central Committee and the Sibul and Miri chiefs of SLL. I have cited the transcripts as critically as I have used the colonial sources. Three interviewees have elected to remain semi-anonymous: they are cited as Mr. Khoo, Mr. Ho and Mr Lin in the text. Although tempered by the distance of time, the broad outlines and the decisive moments of their political careers remain vivid in their memories. They are tapped for the first time in the ensuing narrative.

## Chapter Two

### The Making of a Revolutionary Generation

In this chapter, I explore the causes that led to the creation of a generation of revolutionary-minded Chinese youth in Sarawak. While most scholars have focussed on the issue of organised political indoctrination of the left-wing Chinese intelligentsia through an organisation known as the Anti-Fascist League,<sup>1</sup> I argue that it is not so much their direct contact with the youth but their efforts in publishing and education that left behind a far larger legacy. These two social transformations, the rise of literacy rates and the increasing flow and availability of left-wing literature, made the radicalisation of Chinese youth almost inevitable. The point of no return was reached in 1949 when Communism prevailed in China. It became the template on which their vision of a Communist utopia could and should be attained.

#### 2.1 The left-wing Chinese intelligentsia and the challenge to ‘*towkay* leadership’

The migration of educated Chinese political exiles was one of the most important ways by which the new progressive ideas of socialism and democracy were transmitted to the Chinese in Sarawak. Migration to the *Nanyang* (literally, the South Seas) to escape political persecution was a modern phenomenon that began with the flight of the reformist Kang Yuwei and revolutionary Sun Yat-sen to the *Nanyang* at the turn of the twentieth century. Communism took root in Chinese politics after 1919 and the first wave of left-wing political exiles to the *Nanyang* began in earnest with the collapse of the first Kuomintang (KMT) – Chinese Communist Party (CCP) United Front in 1927, culminating in the formation of the CCP’s *Nanyang* Provisional Committee in Singapore in the same year. Since these political refugees were usually better educated than their fellow Chinese labourer/merchant sojourners, they tended to gravitate towards occupations that required these qualifications – politicians, teachers, journalists and booksellers. Until the outbreak of the Second World War, the majority of these *Nanyang* intelligentsia behaved politically just as they did back in China. When Japan invaded China in 1937, the intelligentsia were highly successful in

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<sup>1</sup> Porritt, *Communism in Sarawak*, pp. 7-9; Hardy, *Danger Within*, 2-3.

mobilising the resources and emotions of the Southeast Asian Chinese to the cause of defending the Chinese nation.

In 1937, Wu Chan (伍禅) would be one of the most learned Chinese exiles of his time to arrive in Sarawak. Born in Lufeng County, Guangdong Province in 1904, he attended the Tokyo Higher Normal School in Japan at the age of twenty-two. When Japan invaded Manchuria in 1931, Wu Chan quit his studies and moved to Fujian Province to teach. At Quanzhou, Wu Chan was acquainted with the famous New Literature writer Ba Jin (巴金), with whom he co-founded the 'Cultural Life Publishing House' (文化生活出版社) in Shanghai in 1936. Wu Chan moved among the left-wing circles in Shanghai and was once picked up by the French police for being a 'Communist suspect'. After the Marco Polo Bridge incident in July 1937, Wu Chan fled Shanghai to join his parents and maternal relatives in Siniawan, Sarawak, where they owned several shop-houses. Once settled, Wu Chan became the principal of the Hwa Chiau School and the Chairman of the China Relief Fund branch at Bau, a gold-mining town sixteen miles southwest of Kuching on the Sarawak River's right-hand branch. Wu Chan would take his expertise and networks in the publishing and education world to Kuching at the end of the war.<sup>2</sup>

Another intelligentsia-in-exile who would play a pivotal role in the transmission of new ideas was Chin Shaw Tung (陈绍唐). Born in 1916 in Jiexi County, Guangdong Province, Chin was exposed to Sun Yat-sen's revolutionary ideas from young. After graduating from the Guangdong Lingnan University (广东岭南大学), he returned to his hometown to teach. During the Sino-Japanese War, he was active in a local left-wing resistance outfit, the Lingdong Youth Anti-Enemy Comrades' Association (岭东青年抗敌同志会). In the autumn of 1940, when the KMT began to suppress local left-wing organisations, he decided to flee to Sarawak, where a few of his cousins had already migrated. With the aid of a relative, he slipped out of KMT-controlled Swatow and moved to Kuching, arriving in 1941. Joining his

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<sup>2</sup> Julitta Lim, *Pussy's in the Well: Japanese Occupation of Sarawak, 1941-1945* (Kuching: SUPP Research and Resource Centre, 2005), pp. 308-9; 'Zhi Gong Dang Commemorates the Centennial of Wu Chan's Birth' in *Guangming Daily News*, 2.9.2004, accessed from [www.gmw.cn](http://www.gmw.cn); Gu Ye Ping, 'Bajin and his teacher friends' in *The World of Education*, 2001, No. 1, accessed from Bajin Literary Association of Shanghai website, [www.bjwxg.cn](http://www.bjwxg.cn); Li Ji Sheng, *Bajin and the Cultural Life Publishing House* (Shanghai: Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House, 2003), pp. 12-50.

cousins further up the Sarawak River, he became a shop assistant at Bau. An avid student of history, he devoted his spare time during the Japanese Occupation (1941-1945) to research the history of the Bau gold-miners' 1857 Rebellion against the Brooke regime.<sup>3</sup> He would run a bookstore and a grocery store in Kuching after 1945.

While the majority of the Chinese merchant leaders in Sarawak campaigned hard to boycott Japanese goods and to raise funds for the China Relief Fund, only the left-wing intelligentsia felt sufficiently motivated to organise resistance after the Japanese occupied Sarawak in January 1942.<sup>4</sup> In 1941, Wu Chan and Chin Shaw Tung founded the Sarawak Anti-Fascist League, which had active adherents in the Chinese settlements on the Sarawak River and in Kuching.<sup>5</sup> Anti-Fascist League leaders were in large part Chinese school teachers such as Lee Shu Foon (李树芬) and Tan Sze Min (陈士民), who taught at Bau and Siniawan, and He Hemin (何和民) in Kuching.<sup>6</sup> Owing perhaps to the lack of arms, the Anti-Fascist League limited its activities to mitigating the material privations inflicted on the locals by the war. It also maintained contact with supplied food and fabric replenishments to the Pontianak-based West Borneo Anti-Japanese League, whose botched plans for armed uprising triggered a massacre of more than 130 Chinese merchants from June to August 1944.<sup>7</sup> Supplies had been obtained through a profitable rice-monopoly license Wu Chan had fortuitously been granted by his former classmate in Tokyo, now a general with the Japanese army in Kuching.<sup>8</sup> Towards the end of the war, Anti-Fascist League members in Kuching were plotting to assassinate Japanese soldiers when the abrupt end to the Pacific War in August 1945 intervened.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Li Nanlin, 'Chin Shaw Tung's Accomplishments' in: *Sarawak International Times* (henceforth, SIT), 10.1.2003; Chan Siaw Hee claims he only found out much later on that Chin Shaw Tung had become a member of the Chinese Communist Party before he came to Sarawak. See Chan, *A Memoir*, pp. 166-7.

<sup>4</sup> For China Relief Fund activities in Sarawak, see Reece, *Masa Jepun*, pp. 18-21. However, no mention is made in the book about anti-Japanese resistance in Sarawak led by Wu Chan.

<sup>5</sup> Hardy, *Danger Within*, p. 2. Other sources claim that this organisation bore the name 'North Borneo Anti-Japanese Alliance'. See Lim, *Pussy's in the Well*, pp. 308-9; Cai Ren Long, 'The anti-Japanese struggles launched by the Indonesian Overseas Chinese in various islands' in *A Selected Volume of Historical Sources on the Overseas Chinese Anti-Japanese and National Salvation Movement*, Cai Ren Long and Guo Liang Zhu (eds.), (Fuzhou: China Overseas Chinese Historical Association, Chinese Communist Party Fujian Province Commissioned Party History Work Committee, 1987), pp. 718, 726-7.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Fong Moi Kee, 16.1.2007. Fong, born in Siniawan in 1931, were taught by both.

<sup>7</sup> Reece, *Masa Jepun*, pp. 160-161; Cai, 'Anti-Japanese Struggles', pp. 718, 726-7.

<sup>8</sup> Lim, *Pussy's in the Well*, p. 308.

<sup>9</sup> Chan, *A Memoir*, pp. 112-3. Chan's uncle, Chan Joo Loong, was a member and was privy to the plot.

The combination of their left-wing beliefs and a sense of moral superiority over former community leaders who had ‘collaborated’ with the Japanese made the left-wing Chinese intelligentsia head a brief challenge for the leadership of the Chinese community after the war. The Brookes, like the Dutch and British colonisers, had appointed wealthy local Chinese merchants as ‘Kapitans’ China to represent the Chinese migrants’ interests and act as the intermediary between the government and the Chinese. The wealth and power of these ‘Kapitans’ were in turn reinforced through the colonial governments’ granting of lucrative gambling, opium and spirits licences and tax revenue farms.<sup>10</sup> During the interregnum, spontaneous instances of mob violence against these ‘running dogs’ took place across the country until the Australian military administration re-installed order in September 1945. The British colonial government then granted clemency to all collaborators in Southeast Asia in March 1945.<sup>11</sup> Yet the depth of popular despise for ‘collaborators’ and especially those who were re-installed to positions of power and privilege was still palpable four years later, as evidenced by the following testimony given by Dr. T’ien Ju-Kang, a visiting Colonial Social Science Research Council researcher in 1950:

(Q)uite a large number of those men whom the Sarawak Chinese had been used to regard as pillars of their society turned out to be collaborators...The present “leaders” are like those small celluloid dolls with leaden feet: even such great events as the Japanese Occupation and the subsequent liberation could not turn them down. Within the existing system they are adaptable to any external political situation. It is not surprising, therefore, that they should be staunch opponents of any fundamental change in local Chinese organization.<sup>12</sup>

The call for radical change to the social and political order among Sarawak Chinese was initiated through the Overseas Chinese Youth Associations (华侨青年社, henceforth OCYA). Chin Shaw Tung founded Sarawak’s first OCYA in Bau in 1943.<sup>13</sup> After Kuching’s liberation in September 1945, both Chin and Wu Chan, who had moved to Kuching by then, were instrumental in starting the Kuching OCYA

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<sup>10</sup> Craig Lockard, ‘Leadership and Power within the Chinese Community of Sarawak: A Historical Survey’ in *Journal of South-East Asia Studies*, II: 2, Sept, 1971, pp. 195-217.

<sup>11</sup> Reece, *Masa Jepun*, pp. 219-228.

<sup>12</sup> T’ien Ju-K’ang, *The Chinese of Sarawak: A Study of Social Structure* (Kuching: SUPP Headquarters, Research and Resource Centre, 1997), pp. 118 and 121.

<sup>13</sup> Chan, *A Memoir*, p. 113.

from ‘behind-the-scenes’.<sup>14</sup> OCYAs mushroomed throughout Sarawak during and after the war. OCYAs, in providing reading materials and cultural activities for the youth, were possibly at first designed by the Chinese intelligentsia as a stop-gap measure to alleviate the rising numbers of over-aged and under-educated Chinese youth – a result of the closure of Chinese schools during the war. Yet once the youth gathered under the OCYA banner, it quickly gained its own life and *raison d’etre*. In a 1951 secret memo on ‘Chinese affairs’, a District Officer, J.R. Outram reported:

As events in China developed in favour of the Communists, so these Youth Associations became tinged more and more deeply pink, until with the establishment and recognition of the People’s Government in 1949/50 they attained the position of leaders of the overseas Chinese in the celebrations attendant thereon. They are now the liaison between the People’s Government through Communist Associations in Hong Kong and Singapore and the Sarawak Chinese.<sup>15</sup>

Soon after its founding, the Kuching OCYA challenged the legitimacy of the traditional Chinese leaders to represent the Chinese community in the ‘cession’ controversy – Charles Vyner Brooke’s proposed ‘sale’ of Sarawak to the British government in the spring of 1946. The Chairman of the Kuching OCYA, Lim Kong Gan (林光彦), served as one of the most vocal spokesperson for the Chinese community during the ensuing public debates. In a meeting held on 27 January 1946, OCYA passed four resolutions. The first two struck down the pro-Cession representations of the Kapitan-General Ong Tiang Swee and other merchant leaders and questioned their right to speak for all Sarawak Chinese. The other two aimed:

- iii) to establish an ‘Overseas Chinese Committee for the Promotion of Democratic Politics’; and
- iv) to organise a supreme authority for the Sarawak Chinese.<sup>16</sup>

OCYA protests failed to obstruct the cession of Sarawak to the British Empire. Neither did its call for democratic politics and a supreme authority for the Sarawak

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<sup>14</sup> Li Zhenyuan, ‘A True Rendition of the Stormy Times (31): Cession Crisis (4)’ in SIT, 19.8.2006. This SIT feature writer published from June to September 2006 sixty-three articles on the history of Sarawak in its times of crises under the series titled *Feng Bao Shi Lu* (A True Rendition of the Stormy Times). All sixty-three articles can be accessed at [www.intimes.com.my/write-html/write-mulu.htm](http://www.intimes.com.my/write-html/write-mulu.htm).

<sup>15</sup> The National Archives (TNA): Public Records Office (PRO), Colonial Office (CO) 537/7358: ‘Report on a Tour of Sarawak’, 13.3.1951.

<sup>16</sup> *Overseas Chinese Daily News*, 6.2.1946. Quoted in Reece, *Name of Brooke*, p. 207.

Chinese bear any concrete effect. Wu Chan had a hand in its organisation though he eventually remained in the background. In September 1945, Wu Chan approached Jian Changbo (简长伯), the pre-war Chairman of the China Relief Fund (Kuching branch), for assistance. Jian then called on all Chinese dialect and voluntary associations in Kuching to nominate their representatives, amongst whom the candidates elected Lim Kong Gan chairman. The Chung Hwa Association (古晋中华公会, henceforth, CHA) was then officially registered on the same day as the colonial government was installed: 1 July 1946.<sup>17</sup> In the two years of its existence, the CHA harboured pretensions to be the ‘supreme authority’ among the Sarawak Chinese on the simple premise that all Chinese dialect and clan bodies were among its constituent members.

Yet two developments quickly ensued to undercut the CHA’s political authority, ensuring its demise by 1948. First, the British colonial government quickly restored the traditional system of ‘indirect rule’ through the Secretariat of Chinese Affairs. This office was headed by a Hokkien-speaking colonial officer, who dealt with all aspects Chinese governance from the control of Chinese immigration and labour to the adjudication of Chinese traditional law in the colonial civil court. Some rudimentary element of democracy was injected into the ‘Kapitan’ system when it was resurrected after the war. At the village level, male heads of households would now elect a Kapitan every three years.<sup>18</sup> In larger settlements or in towns, where there were mixed dialect groups, the individual dialect associations elected their own representatives to ‘Chinese Advisory Boards’, on which the local District Officer sat as the chairman. Dr. T’ien’s survey of the Sarawak Chinese indicated that the essential pre-war political-economic features of colonial society had been all but restored. His study found Chinese dialects and clans to be highly deterministic in the individual’s wealth, power, and economic function in society. He cited in particular the case of the Teochew and Hokkien community, whose kinship connections with the Singapore entrepot market, ensured their dominance in the lucrative grocery and rubber trade. This contrasted with the plight of the rural Hakkas, who were for the most part peasants in the outlying regions of Kuching, struggling to make ends meet.

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<sup>17</sup> Li, ‘Cession Crisis (4)’.

<sup>18</sup> ‘Report on a Tour of Sarawak’, 13.3.1951.



Dr. T'ien was also highly critical of the façade of colonial democracy in the 'Chinese Advisory Board' system. He found:

(a)t one Association meeting a young Chinese made an impassioned speech concerning the welfare of the Association members. The chairman, a wealthy *towkay*, grew impatient. Suddenly he interrupted the young speaker: "How many rubber estates do you own?" The young answered none. "In that case," said the Chairman, with a sigh, "since you have nothing to contribute when the subscription list comes round, you had better cut your speech short".<sup>19</sup>

Then in 1948, the Kuomintang (KMT) government set up a Chinese consulate in Kuching, which made claims to representing all Chinese in Sarawak. This move was in turn much lauded by the Chinese merchants, who set up an endowment fund for the construction of the consulate.<sup>20</sup> The impact of the arrival of the KMT Chinese consul on local society was to further reinforce the power of the local merchants and to increase the stature of the KMT among the Chinese in Sarawak at the expense of the left-wing Chinese intelligentsia. The Chinese intelligentsia's first bid for local power hence ended in 1948 with the closure of the CHA. Henceforth, they would channel their efforts to radically change the social and economic structure of Sarawak Chinese society through their daily contact with the young.

## 2.2. Education and Literacy

Chinese schools were private institutions, run and financed by voluntary Chinese businessmen, shopkeepers and village leaders, and in a few cases, missionaries with minimal intervention and assistance from the colonial state. Until 1956, Chinese schools in Sarawak, like elsewhere in Southeast Asia, were administered by voluntary Boards of Management, which were elected by the local community and financed mainly by fees and private donations. In 1953 for example, the government expenditure per pupil was \$50 to \$60 in government schools, \$6 in private schools, \$14 in Mission schools, and \$2 in Chinese schools. An average

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<sup>19</sup> T'ien, *Chinese of Sarawak*, p. 115.

<sup>20</sup> Lau Tzy Cheng, *The History of the Chinese Consulate in North Borneo* (Sibu: Sarawak Chinese Cultural Association, 2000). The Consulate closed in January 1950 after Britain established diplomatic ties with Communist China.

Chinese primary school in Kuching received 6% of its annual expenditure from government grants, the other 94% had to be met through fees and donation.<sup>21</sup> In 1936, one in five Sarawak Chinese who entered a Chinese primary school could expect to graduate from it six years later. Three in a hundred made it through three more years of junior middle school. For the forty-six students who graduated from junior middle school that year, those who chose to further their studies in the Chinese language stream would have had to do so in Singapore.<sup>22</sup> Education for the Chinese underwent significant changes during the post-war era. In this section, I examine the extent of these changes.

The end of the war heralded a period of unprecedented expansion and development for Sarawak Chinese schools. Across Sarawak, local Chinese community leaders resumed pre-war primary schools immediately after the war. 18,222 pupils were enrolled in 178 Chinese Primary Schools in 1946, compared with 13,416 in 1941 and 7189 in 1936. Seven years later, the figure had increased by almost ten thousand, together with the addition of sixty schools.<sup>23</sup> This rapid expansion in the primary school student population translated into a rising demand for higher education in the early 1950s. A three-year junior middle school education became a common aspiration for the urban youth in Kuching, Sibul and Miri. In 1951, the creation of a senior middle department<sup>24</sup> made available for the first time in Kuching the standard twelve-year (six-three-three) Chinese education system. Students from Sibul, Miri and as far as Brunei travelled to Kuching to the CHMS, which became the premier institute for Chinese education throughout Sarawak.<sup>25</sup> The Kuching CHMS's enrolment expanded tenfold over the next decade from more than two hundred in 1946 to seven hundred in 1952, eleven hundred in 1954 and over two thousand in 1957.<sup>26</sup> Nine in ten Chung Hua Primary School graduates furthered their

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<sup>21</sup> See E. W. Woodhead, *Report upon Financing of Education and Conditions of Service in the Teaching Profession in Sarawak* (Kuching: Sarawak Government Printing Office, 1955), pp. 12 and 59.

<sup>22</sup> These estimates are calculated based on the assumption that a constant number of students enrolled during the previous nine years. See TNA: PRO CO 1045/493: R.W. Hammond, *Report on Education in Sarawak, 1937*, Appendix II.

<sup>23</sup> Woodhead, *Report upon Financing of Education*, pp. 43 and 47. 1936 figures are derived from Hammond, *Report on Education*, Appendix II.

<sup>24</sup> Liu Pak Khui, *Twenty Years of Teaching: Twenty Years in Chung Hwa Middle School* (Singapore: The South Seas Society, 1984) p. 94.

<sup>25</sup> Chan, *A Memoir*, p. 64.

<sup>26</sup> Liu, *Twenty Years*, pp. 85-93.

studies in the middle school.<sup>27</sup> In Sibü, at least five Chinese middle schools operating before the war were re-opened within a year of liberation.<sup>28</sup> On the fringes of the cities, peasants surviving on market gardening also began to clamour for educational facilities beyond the primary level. Guong Ming Middle School (光民中学) at Sungai Bidut, about fifteen kilometres outside Sibü, was one of at least four middle schools established in the early 1950s to meet this demand.<sup>29</sup> By 1953, students enrolled in Chinese secondary schools outnumbered English Missionary and Malay Government schools by a ratio of twenty-seven to ten and one respectively.<sup>30</sup>

Rapid expansion in education facilities was complemented by unity on an unprecedented degree among the Chinese educationists. A convention of seventeen local Chinese intelligentsia of all political persuasions and dialect groups gathered on 17 October 1945 to form the Chung Hwa Education Society (中华教育会, CHES) to discuss the future of Chinese education. Former colonial education inspectors Hsu Yaw Tong (徐耀东) and Ban Tao Kui (万道奎) had convened the CHES, which included at least four members of the Anti-Fascist League: Wu Chan, Lin Lixin (林立信), Wu Xiaoyuan (吴小园) and Tan Sze Min.<sup>31</sup> The meeting elected Wu Chan Chairman. Before the war, nine separate dialect schools were run by their respective dialect associations principally for their own communities. At this historic meeting, it was decided to resolve dialect parochialism among the Chinese by mixing all Chinese in one school system, under the banner of 'Unity in Organisation, Unity in Management' (统筹统办). The use of dialects as the media for teaching and communication was replaced by *Guoyu* (National Language, i.e. Mandarin). Five Chung Hwa primary schools and the Chung Hwa middle school would now be jointly managed by the newly established Kuching Chung Hwa Schools Board of Management, which would draw its directors from the various dialect associations.

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<sup>27</sup> Chan, *A Memoir*, p. 64.

<sup>28</sup> Chung Hua (中华, established 1936), Tung Hua (敦化, 1934), Chung Hin (中兴, 1938), Kwang Hua (光华, 1926), Chung Cheng (中正, 1934). See Huang Zhaofa, *A Tumultuous Century of Chinese Education in Sarawak* (Miri: Law Yew Muk, 2004), pp. 164-73.

<sup>29</sup> The three other newly created Chinese middle schools were Kiang Hin Middle School (建兴中学, 1948), Kai Dee Middle School (开智中学, 1952) in Sibü, and the Miri Chung Hua Middle School (中华中学, 1953). Huang, *Chinese Education in Sarawak*, pp. 84-8, 108-25, 178-80.

<sup>30</sup> Woodhead, *Report upon Financing of Education*, p. 7.

<sup>31</sup> Wu Xiaoyuan's participation in the Bau-based Anti-Fascist League is recorded in my interview with Mr. Lin, 1.2.2007.

The result of this massive expansion of the number of Chinese primary schools was such that when a Sarawak nationalist discourse began to emerge in the later half of the 1950s, the most common language of literacy among the people of Sarawak was Chinese (69,572 out of a total literate population of 124,420), followed by English (48,379) and Malay (34,399). Literacy was also much more prevalent among the young amongst the Chinese. In 1960, the number of teenagers who could read and write in the Chinese language outnumbered the number of Chinese literate adults (aged 30-39 years) by four to one (32,281 to 8,799).<sup>32</sup> Concurrent with this rise in rates of literacy among the young was their demand for reading material. What did the youths of the period read?

### 2.3 Literature and Revolution

The school texts that shaped the fundamental worldview of the post-war middle school generation were essentially China-oriented. Students in Sarawak Chinese schools learnt from the same set of textbooks that were used in pre-war Republican China, albeit adapted for use in British Malaya. Of the five major publishers of Chinese textbooks – the Commercial Press, Chung Hua Book Company, World Book Company, and *Nanyang* Book Company – all but the last were based in Shanghai, though all had branches in Singapore from between 1916 and 1926.<sup>33</sup> According to an independent survey of Chinese education in British Malaya in 1951, of the History and Geography textbooks, ‘fifty per cent of contents [were] devoted to China, 25 per cent. to Overseas Chinese and places and events related to China; only 25 per cent to rest of world [sic], including Malaya’, while the Civics textbook suffered from the ‘chief lack [of] emphasis on communal and racial co-operation’.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> L.W. Jones., *Sarawak: A Report on the 1960 Population Census* (Kuching: Sarawak Government Printing Office), pp. 27, 47 and 81.

<sup>33</sup> Yap Wee Cheng, ‘Publication of Chinese-School Textbooks in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia’ in *A Historical Survey of Chinese-School Textbooks in Singapore Malaysia, and Indonesia*, Yeap Chong Leng and Wee Tong Bao (eds.), (Singapore: Chinese Heritage Centre, 2005), pp. 53-65.

<sup>34</sup> William P. Fenn and Wu Teh-yao, *Chinese Schools and the Education of Chinese Malaysians: The Report of a Mission invited by the Federation Government to study the problem of the Education of Chinese in Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur: Government Printer, 1951), pp. 19-21. Tom Cromwell, Sarawak’s Secretary of Chinese affairs, and Hugh Earnshaw, Sarawak’s Director of Education observed and participated in the presentation of Fenn and Wu’s findings, held in Singapore. See, Fenn and Wu, *Education of Chinese Malaysians*, p. 1 and London School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS): GB 102 PP MS 33, Box 7 File 29: Cromwell to parents, 26.5.1951.

School texts anchored the Chinese middle school student in Chinese history and geography, but ultimately it was the literature lessons that gave them a civilisational outlook. A junior middle three student reading *The Selected Chinese Works Volume V* (中华文选) would be exposed to the full gamut of Chinese literary genres: from anti-feudal May Fourth novelettes, romantic Tang poems, melancholic Song verses to classical historical treatises on ancient Chinese civil wars.<sup>35</sup>

While school texts instilled in the youths a civilisational mooring, newspapers, literary journals, novels in turn shaped their political views of the contemporary world. Communist-inspired newspapers were readily available in Kuching and Sibü during the period 1945-1951. In fact they were produced by the left-wing Chinese intelligentsia, most of whom held concurrent teaching positions in the Chung Hwa schools. In Kuching, it was the Wu Chan-led intelligentsia class who spearheaded the editorial of the left-wing *Chung Hwa Journal* (CHJ), published from November 1945 to April 1951, while the *Overseas Chinese Daily News* and *Modern Critic* represented right-wing views. The CHJ was produced by the Wu Chan-led intelligentsia, Ih Yee-wu (易艺伍) and Wu Xiaoyuan, who were both teachers at the Kuching CHMS. In Sibü, *Chiau Sheng Pau* (CSP), published from August 1950 to August 1951, and edited by Song Liangzan (宋凉赞) and Xu Laifu (许来夫), both teachers at the Sibü CHMS, was pitted against the right-wing *See Hua Daily*. In its inaugural editorial, *Chiau Sheng Pau* declared that one important task the paper faced was to ‘foster culture’ among the masses. This it did in the section ‘Culture Palace’, in which a writer argued the case for the ‘spread of scientific knowledge to the masses, so as to break up superstitious beliefs’. A full page dedicated to an article by Ih Yee-wu indicated its fraternal connection.<sup>36</sup> British intelligence noted that the ‘*Chiau Sheng* [sic.] newspaper of Sibü reproduces after about ten days the same blocks as the CHJ of Kuching’.<sup>37</sup>

Yet the young were not limited to the left-wing publications of the local scene. Singapore newspapers of all genres were distributed widely across the major Sarawak

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<sup>35</sup> Song Han Wen, *The Selected Chinese Works Volume V* (Singapore, Hong Kong: Chung Hwa Book Company, 1968).

<sup>36</sup> *Chiau Sheng Pau*, 9.8.1950.

<sup>37</sup> TNA: PRO CO 537/6085: ‘SBPIR for December 1950’.

cities. Two of the most popular left-wing publications in Kuching during the early post-war period were *Nan Chiau Jit Poh* and *Feng Hsia*,<sup>38</sup> both edited by Hu Yu-Chih (胡愈之), an underground CCP member and Chairman of the China Democratic League, Malaya Branch (based in Singapore). *Feng Hsia* in particular was a weekly journal targeted at Chinese youth scattered across Southeast Asia. In his memoir, Hu recalls the ideological motivation behind his editorial policy:

After two major wars, the tide of global democracy and freedom rose high, the 'countries below the winds' no longer desired to be dominated and enslaved by the West. In Java, Vietnam, Burma, and Calcutta, calls for 'war' were sounded everywhere...How should one comprehend these 'countries below the winds', how should one listen to the cries of their exploited and enslaved peoples, reflect their hopes and demands, such were the wishes of the founders of *Feng Hsia*. Hence, we named our little publication *Feng Hsia* to complement the national liberation struggles that were erupting like volcanoes in the 'countries below the winds', uphold peace and harmony in the Far East, within which included China's domestic struggle for Democracy, Peace, and Unity.<sup>39</sup>

A second generation of local-oriented Singapore left-wing literary publications, which began to emerge from 1954, was also widely read among Sarawak's youth. The two most popular were *Huangdi* (荒地, literally *Barren Land*) and *Gengyun* (耕耘, *Cultivation*).<sup>40</sup> Another popular source of progressive literature was the CCP-sponsored presses and publishers based in Hong Kong. With a small delivery fee, many Chinese youth managed to subscribe to Communist newspapers such as *Ta Kung Pao* (大公报) and *Wen Hui Bao* (文汇报) and novelettes and political treatises published by the Joint Publishing Company (三联书局) and New Democracy Book Company (新民主主义书局) in Hong Kong.<sup>41</sup>

The youth's initiation into the world of revolution often began with reading cartoons or novels depicting the life-stories of Communist heroes and martyrs. Two of the most popular Chinese martyr figures were Liu Hulan (刘胡兰) and Dong Cunrui (董存瑞), both of whom were young Chinese Communist soldiers who sacrificed

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<sup>38</sup> Interview with Mr. Khoo, 12.5.2006.

<sup>39</sup> Hu Yu-chih and Shen Zi Jiu, *Exile on the Equator* (Beijing: Joint Publishing Company, 1985), p. 109.

<sup>40</sup> Most informants mentioned these two titles in the interviews.

<sup>41</sup> Interviews with Tan Lee Seng, 27.2.2007; and Mr. Khoo, 11.1.2007.

their lives for the causes of patriotism and communism in the Anti-Japanese resistance war and the Korean War. But by far the most influential fictional hero was the Russian revolutionary protagonist in *How The Steel Was Tempered*.<sup>42</sup> Most of the interviewees can still recite this passage in the novel:

Life is the most valuable object for mankind. Everyone has only one go at it. A man should live his life in this way: Looking back, he should not regret having squandered his time, nor should he feel shameful for having been vulgar and despicable. On his deathbed, he will be able to say, “My entire life and all my energies have been devoted to the most spectacular mission in the world – to struggle for the liberation of all mankind.”<sup>43</sup>

Having been persuaded to the revolutionary cause through the emotional appeal of the fictional characters, Sarawak’s youth became motivated to discover the ideology behind such fervour. At this stage, many of them eagerly sought or were introduced to Communist primers *Historical Materialism and the Development of Society and Masses’ Philosophies*, through which they mastered basic Marxist theories. Take Tan Lee Seng’s case. He was raised in a shop-house along Courthouse Road in the Kuching bazaar. From young, he was exposed to the KMT-sponsored *Chung Xing Daily News* (中兴日报), which his elders read in the shop. In his final year at the Chung Hwa Primary School (No. 4) in 1949, one of his classmates passed him some cartoons, which depicted the life-stories of revolutionary heroes in China’s War of Resistance. From there, Tan joined his friends in a study cell, where he began to delve into Communist theories. For him, it was when he read *Historical Materialism and the Development of Society and Masses’ Philosophies* that he became firmly entrenched in his revolutionary belief.<sup>44</sup> The argument was rational and scientific: man had evolved from primate, from slavish society to the feudal, from the agrarian society to the industrial, and finally they will transit from the capitalist to the socialist and communist society. It would be their life mission to bring about this last stage of human evolution.

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<sup>42</sup> Interview with Bong Kee Chok, 5-6.1.2007.

<sup>43</sup> Nikolay Ostrovsky, Tian Guo Bin (trans.), *How Steel Was Tempered* (Beijing: Yan Shan Publishing House, 2003).

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Tan Lee Seng, 27.2.2007.

The influence of print-capitalism on the spread of nationalism has been mentioned briefly in Chapter 1.4 and will be elaborated further in Chapter 4.2. Its quantitative influence on the transmission of radical left-wing ideas among the young Chinese is more difficult to measure than its qualitative influence for the lack of circulation figures. Some of these publications were produced in Singapore and Hong Kong and made their way in small numbers to Sarawak either through direct postal order by individuals or by the distribution network of Chinese bookshops. The numbers could not have been commensurable with the local newspapers discussed in Chapter 4.2. Yet smaller circulation numbers need not necessarily imply lesser influence: newspapers, journals and books were often passed around and shared among friends and family. What is certain is that the growing circulation of these newspapers and novelettes created a community of socialist consciousness among the growing population of literate young Chinese. From my interviews with the twenty-three communist veterans, the senior generation among them all claimed to have been shaped in their thinking by these early post-war radical publications.<sup>45</sup>

## 2.4 The Template of New China

As the CCP began to gain ground in the Chinese civil war, the idea that the Overseas Chinese had to adapt to the new political realities emerging in mainland China was first articulated by the Colonial Social Science Research Council scholar, Dr. T'ien Ju-K'ang, during his field trip to Sarawak from August 1948 to October 1949. On 1 January 1949, Dr. T'ien argued in an article, 'The Future of *Nanyang* Chinese', published in the *Chung Hwa Journal*, that the six million Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia had to be self-reliant while China was mired in civil war and that the colonial system of ruling the Chinese through appointed 'kapitans' was outmoded, so that what the Overseas Chinese needed was a 'general organisation' (总机构) that 'truly represented' the community's interests.<sup>46</sup> Following the victory of the Communists, Dr. T'ien, who had concluded his sojourn to Sarawak, gave a speech to the Association of Journalists, during which he outlined three new roles for the 'new

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<sup>45</sup> Interviews with Lui How Ming, Tan Lee Seng, Then Joh Kiong, Fong Moi Kee, Bong Kee Chok and Mr. Wu.

<sup>46</sup> *Chung Hwa Journal*, 1.1.1949, full article published in Fong Hon Kah and Lim Shau Hua Juliatta, *A Patriotic Scholar of China: Professor Tien Ju-Kang (Kuching: SUPP Headquarters, Research and Resource Centre, 2004)*, pp. 132-4.



Overseas Chinese'. First, he urged the Chinese to move their capital from trading activities to industrial investments either in China or locally. Second, he continued to push for singular 'modern' governing bodies for Chinese communities. Finally, on nationalism, he dismissed Chiang Kai-shek's 'narrow', 'Han' ethnic chauvinism and called on the Overseas Chinese to treat the indigenous races as equals, and to broaden to their horizon towards 'internationalism'.<sup>47</sup>

Dr. T'ien's framing of the new Overseas Chinese identity gained a wide audience, especially among the young, during his fourteen-month stay in Sarawak. According to his biographer, Dr. T'ien became immensely popular among the Chinese in Sarawak and he was frequently invited to give speeches to Chinese schools and other associations.<sup>48</sup> A contemporary school teacher describes him as an 'extremely left scholar', who 'added oil [to fire] on the heads of the left-inclined people in Sarawak'.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, Dr. T'ien was in close contact with the Chinese intelligentsia network straddling the *Chung Hwa Journal* and the Chinese schools. His impact on the intelligentsia and the young Chinese was affirmed by the manager of *Chung Hwa Journal*, Tan Kheng Huat (陈庆发), who gave the following speech at his farewell party:

Ever since Dr. T'ien came to Kuching, the thinking and learning of our local youths have improved tremendously. This can be attributed to Dr. T'ien's teaching. Now that Dr. T'ien is leaving Kuching, it is a true loss to Kuching's youth. So we hope that Dr. T'ien will have the chance to come back. From now on, we must encourage one another, work hard to learn and to enrich ourselves, in order to strive for new China.<sup>50</sup>

Indeed, Dr. T'ien made a bold political statement on 1 October 1949 when he held a tea party at the Lilian Theatre for sixty-five guests, consisting of 'Chinese school teachers, members of local youth associations and representatives of Chinese Press', to celebrate the Communist victory in China. At this gathering, Dr. T'ien and other speakers welcomed the new Government of China. The Chairman of the Kuching OCYA, Lim Kong Gan, urged his audience to 'widely propagate the

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<sup>47</sup> NCJP, 31.10.1949.

<sup>48</sup> Fong and Lim, *A Patriotic Scholar of China*, pp. 132-4.

<sup>49</sup> Liu, *Twenty Years*, p. 100.

<sup>50</sup> NCJP, 25.10.1949.

meaning of the birth of new China to various settlements, in order that more Chinese would come around to support its cause'. Twice the crowd sang the new Chinese national anthem, 'March of the Volunteers', and a telegram was drafted to congratulate Chairman Mao.<sup>51</sup> According to the colonial Chief Secretary, C.W. Dawson, Dr. Tien's actions 'caused a furore of excitement in Kuching'.<sup>52</sup>

Dawson was concerned that this semi-official researcher's open endorsement of the new Chinese Communist regime would be interpreted by the local Chinese community as an indication of Britain's and the West's weakness vis-à-vis the Communist bloc. Consequently, he responded by expelling Dr. T'ien from Sarawak on 23 October 1949. In a telegram to the Secretary of State for Colonies, Arthur Creech Jones, Dawson urged London to 'make it clear...that recognition of the new Communist Government in China does not imply approval of Russia and that we shall continue to combat communist anarchy wherever it is found'. Wary of 'losing the respect of overseas Chinese', he counselled London to delay recognition of Communist China.<sup>53</sup>

Barely three months later, on 6 January 1950, London established diplomatic ties with Communist China. This about-turn in London's China policy, coupled with the perceived rise of China as a major power, achieved the effect on the Overseas Chinese Dawson had warned against. A day later, on 7 January, forty-one associations and their sixty-eight representatives met at the Kuching Wharf Labourer's Union office and set up the 'Kuching Overseas Chinese Preparatory Committee' to celebrate the founding of the People's Republic of China and the establishment of Sino-British diplomatic ties.<sup>54</sup> Local left-wing leaders staffed the sixteen-men Preparatory Committee: Lim Kong Gan, Chairman of the OCYA, was elected to head the Committee and Yang Zhanmou (杨展谋), a progressive teacher, the Secretary. Others on the committee included trade guild and youth association leaders, Chinese school teachers and principals.<sup>55</sup> On 28 January, a full-day carnival took place in Kuching,

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<sup>51</sup> NCJP, 5.10.1949, p.7 and TNA: PRO CO 927/173/5: Dawson to Jones, 8.10.1949.

<sup>52</sup> NCJP, 5.10.1949, p.7 and TNA: PRO CO 927/173/5: Dawson to Jones, 8.10.1949.

<sup>53</sup> TNA: PRO CO 927/173/5: Dawson to Jones, 8.10.1949.

<sup>54</sup> NCJP, 14.1.1950 and Lau Tzy Cheng, *A Study of Historical Events in Sarawak during the 1950s* (Sibu: Sarawak Chinese Cultural Association, 1992), pp. 35-6.

<sup>55</sup> Lau, *Historical Events*, pp. 35-6.

starting with a mass rally in the morning, followed by a basketball tournament in the afternoon and rounding up in the evening with a fire-torch and *yangko* dance<sup>56</sup> procession. According to *Nan Chiau Jit Poh*, four to five thousand participants processed through the streets of Kuching, surrounded by a crowd of thirty thousand.<sup>57</sup> Subsequently, similar festive carnivals took place throughout all Chinese major settlements in Sarawak.<sup>58</sup> The mass rally in Kuching resolved to send Mao Tse-tung the following telegram:

The Overseas Chinese in Kuching pledge to uphold the Central People's Government with utmost sincerity and welcome the establishment of Sino-British diplomatic relations.<sup>59</sup>

It was on the young Chinese in Sarawak that the rise of Communist China would have the greatest impact. At the 28 January mass rally, young students Huang Jin Mao (黄锦茂) and Tay Chok Chong (郑祝聪) among others called on fellow youths to:

...[S]tep up the work of unifying (other youths) instead of shouting empty slogans, show our strength, raise both our hands, and hand in hand, march forward in big strides. Step up the work of 'learning and practice' (学习), to start from scratch, 'learn and practise' what we don't know and can't do, and to avoid dogmatism and subjectivism.<sup>60</sup>

Between February and June 1950, the colonial local intelligence committee noticed with alarm the public display of euphoria and increasing rate of 'Communist' activities among the youth in OCYAs and Chinese schools across the First Division. In February, the committee noticed an 'increase in interest in padi dance (the *yangko*) in schools and Youth Associations around Kuching'. Then on 4 March, 'speeches were made in support of Sino-Soviet friendship and mutual aid and good deal of new China jingoism were expressed' at the Kuching OCYA. By April, it was noted that four members of the Kuching OCYA had gone to Miri and Seria and that it had been 'carrying on extensive propaganda by means of lectures in outlying parts of 1<sup>st</sup> Division'. In May, school children started making new Chinese flags in art lessons

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<sup>56</sup> *Yangko* was a form of peasant's folk dance popular in Communist-liberated areas in China.

<sup>57</sup> NCJP, 1.2.1950.

<sup>58</sup> Lau, *Historical Events*, pp. 43-52: the next biggest festival took place at Sibu on 17 February 1950.

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> NCJP, 1.2.1950.

and the Students' Self-Government Society at the Kuching CHMS held a concert in which 'communist songs' were sung.<sup>61</sup>

There were two dimensions to the young Chinese's leaning towards China. Under the influence of progressive teachers and print media described in the previous section, a unified China under the Communists appealed to the youth's nationalist sentiments. The second was purely practical. Compared to China, Sarawak offered few educational and career prospects. The case of this Sarawak youth illustrates a longing for China motivated by the two aforementioned motivations:

I am a peasant-gardener, living in a place close to Kuching. By the time of the Japanese Occupation I had received Higher Primary education. On the Allies' liberation (of Sarawak), I even entered the Chung Hwa Middle School in Kuching to study for several months, but due to shortage of funds, I dropped out half-way, and returned to farm in the countryside.

Three years passed in a glimpse, there is a primary school in the countryside where I live, and I am frequently in touch with the schoolteacher. We studied together, and acquired much knowledge. As I became imbued with 'New Democracy', my mind sobered day by day, so that I came to understand what new China meant. Recently, the schoolteacher and I decided to return to our country for further studies. Having obtained our parents' permission and our relatives' help, we would perhaps be back for studies by May this year.<sup>62</sup>

1949 proved to the Overseas Chinese youth that the 'end goal' of Communism was an attainable one, in which China's historical evolution provided them with a ready template. Communism's claim to be universal persuaded those who could not 'return' to China that it could also be applied in Sarawak. Fong Moi Kee was one of those who badly wanted to leave for China but had to stay behind for the lack of travelling expenses:

One particularly unforgettable event occurred after the founding of New China in 1949, when Britain officially recognised Communist China. In Sarawak, the left-wing figures eagerly organised a celebration. On the streets of Kuching there were processions and dancing of the *yangko* and so on. At that time, I happened to be in

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<sup>61</sup> TNA: PRO CO 537/6085: SBPIR for February, March, April and May 1950.

<sup>62</sup> NCJP, 30.1.1950.

Kuching, and together with my friends and relatives, we went onto the streets to watch the crowd. I was so excited that I couldn't prevent myself from joining the procession, tailgating the *yangko* dancers and then starting to dance myself, it was exhilarating to the extremes. From that moment onwards, I yearned for new China and the new way of living, I hoped that all the peoples of Sarawak would stand up, and together we could build a new Sarawak.<sup>63</sup>

Indeed the success of the CCP in China increased the appeal of communism to young Chinese overseas. Fu Yukang (傅玉康), for example, had believed that China had 'created heaven on earth'. This in turn translated into a broader sense of a global struggle for justice against the unequal system of old imperialism, which immediately became relevant in the local context of colonial Sarawak. Fu was born in 1935 to a family of Hakka rubber gardeners in the outskirts of Kuching, where he was a member of the Chung Hwa Middle School's *yangko* dance delegation in the full-day carnival described above. He explains, in hindsight, the appeal of China in the days of 1949-1950:

At that time, the Chinese newspapers in Kuching gave wide coverage to events happening in China, events which were extolled and praised with the most enchanting words...giving the impression that the leaders of the new Communist-led government were creating heaven on earth. To naïve and simple-minded youth, that was very attractive. Some progressive teachers exploited the classroom, boldly propagating new culture and new thoughts, indoctrinating students with Democracy and Communism. Complementing the new developments, the Students' Self-Government Society cyclostyled much information from China, featuring the ongoing educational reforms, episodes of students' lives, the campaign for simplification of Han language, etc. At the same time, some students purchased from the Commercial Press and Joint Publishing Company in Hong Kong many new books, which were circulated among schoolmates. As a result, the sparks of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism began to rekindle and spread among the students.<sup>64</sup>

In this chapter, I showed how Wu Chan and his left-wing intelligentsia circle had attempted but failed to capture the leadership of the Chinese community from the merchant class. Yet the intelligentsia would leave behind a bigger legacy in their roles as transmitters of ideas and promoters of education. Higher rates of literacy and the

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<sup>63</sup> Interview with Fong Moi Kee, 16.1.2007, p.1.

<sup>64</sup> Ke Feng (a.k.a. Fu Yu Kang), *Eaglet Learns to Fly, A Legendary Story of a Sarawak Youth* (Hong Kong: Inspire Publishing Company, 2005), p. 16.

increasing circulation of left-wing newspapers and novels facilitated the transmission of Communist ideas to the minds of the ever enlarging group of young Chinese in Sarawak. Yet no other factor was more critical than the Communist victory in China in 1949 in pushing the wavering and uncertain onto the path of 'revolution', a subject they had up to this point read about only in fiction and in theory. Now, China offered a ready template for action. The next chapter explores how these Chinese youth sought to put ideals into action.

## Chapter Three

### Negotiating the Masses' Line – A Comparison of Two Students' Strikes, 1949-1955

The previous chapter demonstrated how the political and social forces of the post-war world shaped the ideals and aspirations of young Chinese in Sarawak. Over the next six years, the radical students struggled to make sense of their revolutionary ideals against the reality of a relatively peaceful and contented Sarawak. This chapter explores how the youths recovered from a misadventure in 1951 but emerged stronger and more organised to succeed in their second attempt. The lessons they learnt in this period set the course of their anti-colonial 'open front' struggle in the late 1950s.

#### 3.1 The Sarawak New Democratic Youth League and the 29 October 1951 Strike

The first clandestine Communist youth organisation in Sarawak was a manifest product of the Chinese Communist revolution. It had been imported into Sarawak by students who had furthered their studies in Chinese middle schools in Singapore. While studying in the Chinese High School and the *Nanyang* Girls' High, Yun Dafeng (云大风), Ye Qiuxia (叶秋霞) and Huang Huibai (黄辉白) amongst others became members of the Overseas Chinese Progressive Youth Association (进步华侨青年会, OCPYA).<sup>1</sup> The origins of the OCPYA is unclear but according to historian C.C. Chin, OCPYA in Singapore and Malaya functioned as a clandestine youth wing of the openly registered China Democratic League (中国民主同盟, CDL).<sup>2</sup> CDL was in turn founded as a middle way (between the KMT and CCP) political party in 1941, though its policies soon leaned towards the CCP and it began to operate as a CCP satellite in KMT-controlled 'white areas'. CDL in Malaya was openly registered in 1947 to counter the KMT influence among the Chinese in Malaya. Hu Yu-chih, a covert CCP member, headed CDL's Malaya branch in Singapore until

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<sup>1</sup> Interviews with Mr. Khoo, 12.5.2006, and Mr. Lin, 1.2.2007.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with C.C. Chin, 30.4.2007. According to Chin, a historian of the MCP, the link between OCPYA and CDL has never been recorded in open and published sources. This is based on his interview with Yap Hong Hong, a prominent Chinese school principal and leader of the Singapore CDL.

1948.<sup>3</sup> During the time when Yun and Huang were in the Chinese High School, their principal Xue Yongshu (薛永黍) had taken over the directorship (1948-1951) of CDL. CDL's stated youth policy was to 'unite and educate the elite...among the young, to become the future cadres of New China and leaders of Overseas Chinese society'.<sup>4</sup> It was most probably with this agenda in mind that Yun, Ye and Huang set up a branch of the OCPYA in Kuching in 1950.

Yet not all young revolutionary-minded Chinese in Kuching agreed with their proposition. OCPYA had its bases in the Kuching OCYA and the CHMS Students' Self-Governing Society (学生自理会, SSGS). After the colonial government began to clamp down on open propagation of Communism in 1950, more young students joined the underground OCPYA (codenamed Y), which concentrated on the spread of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist ideas and the training of cadres among students. The leaders of OCPYA believed that ethnic Chinese were not 'integral members' of local society. They proposed instead that the Chinese 'assist in the local revolution', as 'Overseas Chinese sojourners' and in the 'spirit of internationalism'. The ultimate aims of this group were to 'Go Back North' and partake in China's socialist revolution. Yet another group of radical students argued that the Chinese had become an integral part of the local population. Hence, they should not see themselves as sojourners, but needed to shoulder the responsibility of leading revolutionary activities. According to Wen Ming Chyuan, who belonged to the latter group, there ensued a 'fierce struggle' between the two groups, and some time in 1951, the latter prevailed.<sup>5</sup>

On 21 October 1951, the splinter group within OCPYA, which had advocated localising the revolution won the struggle and in OCPYA's place, set up the Sarawak

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<sup>3</sup> China Democratic League Central Literary and History Committee (ed.), *Historical Sources on the China Democratic League* (Beijing: Cultural Relics Publishing House, 1991), p. 99. It was only in June 1953 that CDL, 'in consideration of internal and external developments', closed all its overseas branches. See China Democratic League Central Literary and History Committee (ed.), *A Collection of Commemorative Essays on the Sixtieth Anniversary of the Founding of the China Democratic League* (Beijing: Qun Yan Publishing House, 2001), p. 94.

<sup>4</sup> Yap Hong Hong, *The Trial of Fifteen Years of Wandering* (Singapore: Seng Yew Book Store, 1996), p.178.

<sup>5</sup> Wen Ming Chyuan, 'A Historical Outline of the Struggles of the Sarawak Liberation SLL' (1965?); 'The Historical Strengths and Weaknesses of the Organisation' (September 1963).



New Democratic Youth League (砂拉越新民主主义青年团, SNDYL).<sup>6</sup> Three of its most prominent leaders were Huang Jinmao (黄锦茂), Qiu Liben (丘立本) and Tay Chok Chong (郑祝聪). All were students of the Kuching CHMS.<sup>7</sup> Among the three, Huang Jinmao was the central figure. It has been surmised that he might have got in touch with the MCP while he was in transit in Singapore on his way to China in 1950. Huang then returned to further his studies in the newly appended Senior Middle Section in the Kuching CHMS.<sup>8</sup> By October 1951, Tay Chok Chong had graduated from the CHMS. He was noted by the local intelligence committee to be ‘a former office-bearer of the SSGS, and a great supporter of New China among the students’.<sup>9</sup> Qiu Liben was a classmate of Huang’s in the pioneer batch of the Senior Middle One level in 1951. According to Wen’s report, SNDYL ‘opposed the “Go Back North” line’ and ‘set their hands free’ to mobilise the masses, starting from the Kuching CHMS and OCPYA’. To differentiate itself from OCPYA, it was codenamed ‘X’.<sup>10</sup>

The need to go underground had, as mentioned earlier, been intensified by the Sarawak colonial government’s determination to outlaw ‘communism’ ever since the outbreak of the communist insurrection in Malaya in June 1948. These efforts were strengthened after 1949. In 1950 alone, laws were passed in the colonial-dominated Council Negri (Sarawak’s legislative body) to restrict the freedom of movement of ‘undesirable’ persons in March, display of foreign emblems in June, and freedom of assembly in July. By far the most significant piece of legislation passed in that year was the Undesirable Persons (Amendment) Act on 21 November 1950. It gave the Governor-in-Council the power to deport any Sarawak-born, non-indigenous person who was deemed to have ‘obstructed public welfare’.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. Wen avers to October 1951 as the founding date of SNDYL, the exact date is given in Hardy, *Danger Within*, p.2. Porritt’s assertion that Wen Ming Chyuan was one of the students leaders at the Kuching Chung Hwa Middle School in October 1951 is inaccurate. Wen had joined Chung Hwa Public School in Miri as a teacher in ‘autumn 1951’. See *Miri Chong Hwa Public School New School Block Commemorative Volume* (Miri: Miri Chung Hwa Public School New School Block Committee, 1951), p. 75.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Lin Guixing, 1.2.2007.

<sup>8</sup> The character ‘Huang Kun’ refers, most probably to Huang Jinmao. For Huang’s reversal from Singapore back to Sarawak see Ke, *Eaglet*, pp. 22-3.

<sup>9</sup> TNA: PRO CO 1022/201, SBPIR, November 1951.

<sup>10</sup> Wen, ‘Historical Outline’.

<sup>11</sup> Lau, *Sarawak during the 1950s*, pp. 96-117. For an English-language, though less complete compilation of anti-communist legislation, see Porritt, *Communism in Sarawak*, Appendix 1, pp. 255-6.

These recently acquired powers were quickly exercised to check the growth of Communism among the Chinese. In May 1950, the first notification list of ten prohibited Communist books was published.<sup>12</sup> The following month saw the first CHMS teacher, Chen Chao Fah, dismissed for being ‘too political’ in his history lessons.<sup>13</sup> Then in September, immigration regulations were tightened to prevent young Chinese who went to China for education from returning.<sup>14</sup> The leftist *Chung Hwa Journal* was forced to close on 1 May 1951. Its sister paper, *Chiau Sheng Pau*, suffered a similar fate three months later. The most direct blow to the radical students would come on 30 June 1951, when a police raid on the premises of the CHMS SSGS uncovered ‘prohibited books’, causing the Secretary of Chinese Affairs to declare it an unlawful society. Two leaders of the SSGS were expelled. Following the incident, the headmaster, Wu Chan and the principal, Lim Chong Chew, resigned.<sup>15</sup> Then from 1951, the Board of Management began to recruit ex-KMT government officials from Hong Kong as teachers for the Middle School. No less than 53 would be recruited between 1951 and 1957.<sup>16</sup>

The draconian laws and repressive measures in turn created the favourable conditions for SNDYL to launch a strike and ‘mobilise the masses’ in October 1951. From October 1951 to February 1952, the strike would be directed against the ‘reactionary’ principal and the colonial government’s attempt to replace left-wing teachers in the Kuching CHMS with new anti-Communist recruits.<sup>17</sup> Among those targeted were Tu Naiping (涂耐冰), history teacher and KMT member, Ralph Yang Yuhua (杨毓华), English teacher and a suspected informer of Special Branch, Lin Bomei (林伯美), the new Discipline Master, recruited from Hong Kong to replace Wu Chan and Zhang Jun (张俊), an American-graduate who replaced Lim Chong Chew as principal from July 1951.<sup>18</sup> These new staff members had begun to restrict the students’ left-wing activities after the June 1951 incident.

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<sup>12</sup> Lau, *ibid*, p. 76 and *NCJP*, 1.7.1950. One book which might already have slipped through was ‘How to build a New Democratic Youth SLL’, published by China Youth Press.

<sup>13</sup> TNA: PRO CO 537/6085, SBPIR, June 1950 and *NJCP*, 19.6.1950.

<sup>14</sup> TNA: PRO CO 537/6085, SBPIR, September 1950.

<sup>15</sup> TNA: PRO CO 537/7340, SBPIR, June 1951 and Ke, *Eaglet*, p. 17.

<sup>16</sup> Liu, *Twenty Years*, pp. 98-9.

<sup>17</sup> Wen, ‘Historical Outline’.

<sup>18</sup> Liu, *Twenty Years*, pp. 98-99; Ke, *Eaglet*, p. 18, and TNA: PRO CO 1022/201: SBPIR, January 1952.

Daily confrontation between students and school authorities had started on 14 October over the ostensible reason of unfair grading in an examination and the alleged ineptitude of the teacher involved. These stand-offs turned violent on 25 October, when the students wrecked the intransigent principal's living quarters. At this point, the principal approached the Secretary of Chinese Affairs, Tom Cromwell, for help. Consequently, the police intervened and detained the student leaders on 29 October.<sup>19</sup> These detentions set off a siege of the principal by a crowd of more than a hundred students, which the police had eventually to disperse with one tear-gas shell. It was at this point when, under the direction of SNDYL, a 19-member 'Strike Directing Group' (罢课领导小组), consisting of representatives from each class in school and headed by Huang Jinmao, Tay Chok Chong and Qiu Liben was set up and the 103-day school-wide strike officially began.<sup>20</sup> This first students' strike in Sarawak history would be remembered by the Chinese as the October Twenty-ninth Strike.

Over the next three months, three factors determined in whose favour the confrontation would work out. First, the court would determine in December whether the radical students responsible for the two acts of violence (25 and 29 October) were guilty, and if so mete out the appropriate penalty. Second, the Kuching Chung Hwa Schools Board of Management, caught in the midst of their social responsibility to the parents and political pressure from the opposing 'Strike Directing Group' and Cromwell, would decide in January 1952 on the number of radical students to expel from the school and the fate of principal Zhang Jun. Third and the most important of all, public opinion would eventually determine, some time in April, which side had won. Cromwell's letter to his parents in November 1951 indicated his appreciation of the situation:

The Chinese are furious with me for interfering in an unprecedented manner with the way they run their schools, because of course they all realize that it is me prodding the education department, and the Chinese who are race-proud and nationalistic (i.e. whether pro-communist or pro-KMT) all realize that the CHMS is deliberately being used as a test piece, as to whether the staff of these schools shall be pro or anti Britain and America, Christianity, communism, Chinese

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<sup>19</sup> SOAS: GB 102 PP MS 33, Box 7 File 29: Cromwell to parents, 1.11.1950.

<sup>20</sup> Li, 'Stormy Times (37): 29 October Strike (2)' in, SIT, 25.8.2006; Interview with Teo Yong Kiaw, 6.3.2007; Interview with Bong Kee Chok and Kee Siaw, 5-6.1.2007.

race-pride and so on... everybody thinks that the strikers are going to win, including the students still at school and the majority of the teachers!<sup>21</sup>

So while Cromwell fixed his goals on steeling the education department and the management of the school for action, the students lost sight of theirs when they abandoned their initial demand for staff changes to embrace an all-out call for the defeat of 'colonialism'.<sup>22</sup> The court's decision in December 1950 to let off the students with a \$100 fine, with no apology required, had initially worked in the students' favour.<sup>23</sup> Then came, on 17 January 1952, the newly re-elected Board of Management's compromise decision to dismiss both the 18 student leaders and principal Zhang Jun.<sup>24</sup> But the students continued with their lofty sloganeering in the premises of the Kuching OCYA, hitherto the meeting place of the student leaders. On 28 January 1952, the tide turned in the colonial government's favour. Cromwell led the police to raid an 'Oppose U.S.A., Assist Korea' performance staged by the strikers at OCYA and personally tore down a Chinese Communist flag in the process.<sup>25</sup> The Kuching OCYA, whose Chairman (Yang You) the British wrongly perceived as the head of the Communist movement, was de-registered on 13 February.<sup>26</sup> The masterstroke was however the appointment of an 'iron-fist' education department inspector, a local Chinese, Hsu Yaw Tong, to head the Middle School in April 1952. Hsu enforced a compulsory re-registration of all students, abolished the entire senior middle section responsible for the strike and expelled a further 15 students.<sup>27</sup> The acts of wrecking a Communist show, proscribing the stronghold of 'Communism' and making all parents pledge for their children's good behaviour drove the message home to the Chinese public. In the meantime, the expelled student leaders, fearful of further arrests, fled to West Kalimantan in February 1952.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> SOAS: GB 102 PP MS 33, Box 7 File 29: Cromwell to parents, 26.11.1951.

<sup>22</sup> According to SIT feature writer Li Zhenyuan, it was at the 1 December 1951 memorial service held for one student, who had been killed in an accident, that the slogan was raised from 'replace the principal' to 'defeating British colonialism and imperialism'. See Li, 'Stormy Times (38): 29 October Strike(3)' in SIT, 26.8.2006.

<sup>23</sup> TNA: PRO CO 1022/201: SBPIR, November 1951.

<sup>24</sup> For a list of old and new Board members, see Liu, *Twenty Years*, p. 102.

<sup>25</sup> The whole incident is recorded in graphical detail in Ke, *Eaglet*, p. 32-35. A toned down account of Cromwell's behaviour in the raid, see: Cromwell to parents, 30.1.1952.

<sup>26</sup> *Sarawak Government Gazette*, 13.2.1952.

<sup>27</sup> Liu, *ibid.*, pp. 104-9.

<sup>28</sup> Ke, *Eaglet*, p. 57 and TNA: PRO CO 1022/201, SBPIR, March 1952.

### 3.2 Defeat and Dissolution

Yet colonial victory was complete only in August 1952 with the declaration of an Emergency in the First Division of Sarawak. The colonial government had seized the opportunity to enact the martial laws, which restricted the people's freedom of movement, between 8 August 1952 and 16 January 1953 when an armed gang of four from West Kalimantan, purporting to act in the name of the 'Sarawak People's Liberation Army', extorted the village of Batu Kitang and shot dead a policeman on its flight back across the border.<sup>29</sup> Declassified minutes of the Supreme Council (highest executive body in the colony) meetings during the period reveal that despite the lack of evidence of political ramifications wider than the isolated criminal incident, the government chose to 'make the most serious assessment of the present situation', in order to prevent the recurrence of the communist insurrection as in Malaya.<sup>30</sup> None of the armed perpetrators were ever found. In fact as early as 18 August, Cromwell had formed the opinion that they were a 'purely criminal gang, using Communism as a cover to bolster up [their] morale and to intimidate the Chinese'.<sup>31</sup> Why then prolong the Emergency for another four months?

The official justification – the need to demonstrate the government's will to prevent the recurrence of the Malayan Emergency<sup>32</sup> – was only a minor part of the reason. The imposition of the Emergency regulations achieved three underlying policy goals. First, the 'Communist' scare associated with an 'Emergency' moved imperial resources to beef up Sarawak's anti-insurrection capability at a rate the local colonial government would otherwise not have enjoyed under peaceful conditions. Cromwell himself exposed the media over-hype to his parents, who were back in England:

Do not be too disturbed at the way journalists have blown up the Sarawak emergency to a tremendous size...I think everybody is deciding to try out in Sarawak all the schemes they would have been

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<sup>29</sup> For a narrative account of the events, see Porritt, *Communism in Sarawak*, pp. 12-17.

<sup>30</sup> TNA: PRO CO 1022/80: Minutes of Supreme Council, 7.8.1952, 14.8.1952, 8.1.1953.

<sup>31</sup> SOAS: GB 102 PP MS 33, Box 8 File 30, Cromwell to parents, 18.8.1952.

<sup>32</sup> The 'Malayan Emergency' was declared by the British colonial government in the Federation of Malaya in June 1948 to forestall the armed insurrection planned by the Malayan Communist Party. Emergency laws suspended the civil liberties of the people to move, assemble, speak and form organizations freely.

able to carry out in Malaya if they hadn't been caught napping...Nearly everybody is enjoying themselves immensely: we all feel that we are several jumps ahead and we intend to keep it that way.<sup>33</sup>

As a result of the 'Emergency', Sarawak received two platoons of police help from the colony of North Borneo for the duration of five weeks. The Deputy Director of Operations in Malaya, General Sir Rob Lockhart carried out a general review of Sarawak's security problems and capabilities. The review, over the course of 1953-54, resulted in an addition of three hundred and eighty personnel (or one-third of existing forces) to the Sarawak constabulary, the consolidation of the Special Branch under an Assistant Commissioner, and the extension of the intelligence activities beyond Kuching to Simanggang, Sibul, Miri and Kuala Belait.<sup>34</sup>

Secondly, the Emergency gave the government powers to detain and deport 'Communist' suspects, without granting them a trial in a court of law as they would have been entitled to in peacetime. On the day the Emergency was declared, twenty-six blacklisted people were detained, the five most notorious of whom were deported to China within the space of a week. Among the five, three (Wu Chan, Lee Shu Foon and Tan Sze Min) were members of the wartime Anti-Fascist SLL, and one, Chai Sze Chung (蔡思忠) had been Chairman of the SSGS in Kuching CHMS.<sup>35</sup> At the end of the Emergency, thirty people were detained, of whom sixteen were deported to or had left on their own volition for China, seven released on bond, and a further seven still being held.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, the involvement of Indonesian elements in the Batu Kitang incident gave the Sarawak government good grounds to initiate joint efforts with the Indonesian authorities to crack down on the SNYDL student leaders, who were by then living in exile in West Kalimantan. On 18 August, a delegation of three Sarawak officials, Tom Cromwell, the Commissioner of Sarawak Constabulary and Haji Mustapha Datu Bandar (Adviser on Malay Affairs), together with a representative of

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<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Porritt, *ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>35</sup> TNA: PRO CO 1022/201, SBPIR, August and September 1952.

<sup>36</sup> TNA: PRO CO 1022/80, Minutes of the Supreme Council, 8.1.1953.

British Security Intelligence (Far East)<sup>37</sup>, held a conference at Pemangkat with Indonesia's Attorney-General, Head of the Intelligence Service, and Pontianak's Chief of Police and Resident. It was reported that 'hopes of future cooperation against Chinese Communists were expressed and information about the Emergency and on persons who were suspected of having unlawfully entered Kalimantan Barat from Sarawak was given to the Indonesian representatives'.<sup>38</sup> Fu Yukang's memoir shows that the group of seven student exiles had settled in Pontianak by June 1952. They had been kept informed of events in Kuching and were aware of the Emergency as well as Cromwell's visit to West Kalimantan in August 1952. While they had initially planned to infiltrate back into Sarawak, these plans were abandoned under the subsequent pursuit by the Indonesian police. In consequence, they left Pontianak for Jakarta in April 1953 before setting off for China three months later.<sup>39</sup>

Hence, by January 1953, the colonial government was indeed 'several jumps ahead' of left-wing forces in Sarawak. The government's will to nip 'Communism' in the bud had been demonstrated during the latter half of the 29 October students' strike and again in the 1952 Emergency. By the end of the Emergency, SNDYL student leaders, the war-time Anti-Fascist SLL members and the left-wing Overseas Chinese intelligentsia had been forcibly removed from Sarawak.

The failure of the October Twenty-ninth Strike and colonial repression under the Emergency regulations triggered a wider social impact than the removal of left-wing leaders. That a 'socialist' society would not be attainable in the near future in Sarawak triggered a wave of youth migration 'back' to China between 1952 and 1955. From mid-1952, the colonial state began to monitor figures of youth migration during this period precisely because it became concerned at the unprecedented spike in youth migration numbers. Between 1953 and June 1956, the annual numbers of young people aged between twelve and twenty-five who migrated to China for good were 347, 586, 258 and 200 (first ten months of 1956) respectively.<sup>40</sup> These were a small proportion of Sarawak's young Chinese, but coming from the educated and informed group, they in fact represented a disproportionate fraction of the young educated elites

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<sup>37</sup> This is a Mr. Oldfield, whose full name and identity is not available.

<sup>38</sup> TNA: PRO CO 1022/201, SBPIR, August and September 1952.

<sup>39</sup> Ke, *Eaglet*, pp. 318-368.

<sup>40</sup> Compiled from SBPIR, 1952-1956 in TNA: PRO CO/1022/201 and CO/1030/242.

of Chinese society. Teo Yong Kiaw, a Junior Middle Two student at CHMS in 1952 recalls:

...(I)n the later stages of the strike, some people brought up (the question of) whether we should return to China or stay behind. At that time, the strike had not ended, (but) many had started feeling disappointed with the struggle, so many of them started applying to return to China. My elder sister was one of them. Among my classmates, more than 20 out of 40-over people left. Perhaps they felt dejected over the defeat of the strike, but their wish to study in China was another reason for their departure.<sup>41</sup>

Wen Ming Chyuan's evaluation of the October Twenty-ninth Strike is significant for two reasons. First, we know that Wen was a member of SNDYL though he was not in Kuching throughout the duration of the strike. His evaluation is hence the closest we have to an internal assessment of the short-lived SNDYL. More significantly, the lessons Wen claimed to have learnt from the failures of SNDYL would be applied to his orchestration of a much more successful clandestine organisation and its coming-of-age school strike in March 1955. This assessment is hence worth quoting at length:

The major weaknesses of 'X' [i.e. SNDYL] were its organisational flaws and political naiveté. Its main leaders, under the influence and deception of the leftist opportunist Kuching OCYA Chairman Yang You, made a leftist opportunist error, in an unduly 'left' struggle. Especially in the latter stages when work on the 'united front' was neglected, [the struggle was] removed from the broad masses, even removed from students, who participated in early stages of the strike, while preparations for the enemy's retaliation were poorly made. When the enemy attacked, the main leading cadres retreated from Sarawak hastily...so that the spectacular October Twenty-ninth struggle eventually ended in defeat.<sup>42</sup>

After the departure of the main SNDYL leaders from February 1952 and the dissolution of SNDYL during the 1952 Emergency, former members of SNDYL set up two clandestine organisations: the 'Progressive Teachers' Association' (进步教师会) and a 'Students' Society' (同学会). The Teachers' Association 'united and organised progressive Chinese school teachers, especially those young teachers who

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<sup>41</sup> Interview with Teo Yong Kiaw, 6.3.2007.

<sup>42</sup> Wen, 'Historical Outline'.



had been won over by the 29 October students' strike'. They were 'sent to rural Chinese schools across Sarawak to be teachers, while initiating the peasants' movement'. The Students' Society 'took charge of students' movement in the Kuching middle school ... [and] started the students' movement in the Third and Fourth Divisions'.<sup>43</sup>

Wen Ming Chyuan was most probably the head of the Students' Society in the Kuching CHMS.<sup>44</sup> Wen was born in 1932 at Kampong Maong, a Hakka-Methodist settlement three miles to the west of Kuching along the Sarawak River. His family sold vegetables at the Gambir Street market in Kuching. Wen attended the Kuching CHMS at the same time as Teo Yong Jim. In the autumn of 1951, before the outbreak of the October Twenty-ninth Strike, he left Kuching for a teaching post in a Chinese primary school, the Miri Chung Hwa Public School. That Wen was already a member of OCPYA/SNDYL by the time he arrived in Miri was indicated by his subsequent action during the 1951 strike. According to Lui How Ming, Wen's local follower, Wen taught him to cyclostyle pamphlets, and instructed him to print news of the ongoing students' strike for distribution throughout the shop-houses and market of Miri. Lui How Ming was subsequently inducted into SNDYL under Wen in early 1952.<sup>45</sup> Wen's teaching stint in Miri proved short-lived. In 1953, he returned to attend the Kuching CHMS Senior Middle Section.<sup>46</sup>

Among ex-members of SNDYL, there emerged divergent opinions over whether to hang on to the 'revolution'. The passive group argued that 'the failure [of the 29 October Strike] indicated that objective conditions for a revolutionary struggle did not exist in Sarawak 'hence they proposed abandoning the revolution'. Moreover, this group 'considered the standard of learning in Marxist-Leninist theories to be too low', so that revolutionary work should only be re-initiated when standards were raised. However, a more active faction, led most likely by Wen Ming Chyuan, pointed

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<sup>43</sup> Wen, *ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> As far as I can ascertain, Wen was the only SNDYL member to have established contacts in the Third and Fourth Divisions as Wen did in the early 1950s during his sojourn to Miri. In early 1952, Wen had despatched Lui How Ming to Sibu to extend SNDYL network to Chinese school students in the Third Division, while he himself stayed on in Miri (Fourth Division) for another year.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with Lui How Ming, 10.1.2007

<sup>46</sup> Teo Yong Kiaw, who was in Junior Middle Three (Upper) in 1953, remembers that Wen was directly one year his senior in Senior Middle One when he 'returned'. Interview with Teo Yong Kiaw, 6.3.2007.

out that the masses' demand for revolution was a given under any colonial situation, hence the 'question hinged on how to lead the masses in a revolutionary uprising', rather than whether or not to start one. Indeed, this group further cited Mao Tse-tung, to support the view that 'Marxist-Leninist theories could only be properly mastered through the execution of revolution'.<sup>47</sup>

The 'passive group' referred to in Wen's document appears to have been the Teachers' Association led by Chin Shaw Tung. Chin had escaped the colonial government's attention during the 1952 Emergency and most probably took over the Teachers' Association from Wu Chan after the latter's deportation. Chin, co-owner of Thai Kong bookstore on India Street in downtown Kuching controlled the lucrative textbook trade throughout the First and Second Divisions' Chinese schools. Through his network with Chinese schools, Chin also had nominal control over the movement of Chinese teachers in the region.<sup>48</sup> At the same time, he provided scholarships and free boarding for needy primary school graduates to further their studies at the Kuching CHMS.<sup>49</sup> Chin's mansion in Kuching became a meeting centre for progressive teachers and boarding house for students. His *nom-de-guerre* was 'the underground Director of Education'.<sup>50</sup> While disagreeing with Wen, Chin nonetheless kept on very good terms with the students.<sup>51</sup> Bong Kee Chok, who was a member of the underground Students' Society, recalls the difference in temperament between the two allied by separate cliques:

At that time there were two propositions. Chin Shaw Tung's group, they were more senior in age. They were not SLL members [but] could be counted as our supporters [and] we in turn respected them. This clique organised the teachers. We advocated initiating [the revolution] from students. [Both cliques] worked in coordination. Later on, we proved that organising students was [the] correct [move], because students had the most vigour... Those teachers who were older and had more exposure to society were more complicated, so that they often had such problems as familial considerations. Those of us who emerged from the cultivation of the students' strikes were full of

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<sup>47</sup> Wen, 'Historical Outline'.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Fong Moi Kee, 16.1.2007.

<sup>49</sup> One such beneficiary was Voon Chang Liew, from the 17<sup>th</sup> Mile. In return, Voon had to distribute the *Sin Wen Pau* for a couple of months. Interview with Voon Chang Liew, 30.1.2007.

<sup>50</sup> Li, 'Stormy Times (29): The Cession Crisis (2)', in SIT, 17.8.2006.

<sup>51</sup> According to Fong Moi Kee, who was on very good terms with both, Wen and Chin met frequently throughout this period. Interview with Fong Moi Kee, 16.1.2007.

passion. We were the ones who truly devoted ourselves to the revolutionary calling without any hesitation. We were committed to the end. And this was how we gradually built on our strength.<sup>52</sup>

### 3.3 The Founding of the Sarawak Liberation League (SLL)

Wen Ming Chyuan's question of 'how to lead the masses' was answered with the return of Teo Yong Jim (张荣任) to Sarawak. Teo was born between 1927 and 1930 in Kuching to a family of Teochew grocers.<sup>53</sup> From young, Teo had developed a keen interest in politics. He followed the course of the Chinese Civil War (1946-1949) battles on radio and reported the events to the family's grocery store assistants. He was also a voracious reader of modern Chinese novels and political treatises. During Dr. T'ien J'u-kang's field trip to Sarawak from September 1948 to October 1949, the scholar apparently made daily visits to his Gambir Street shop-house, where they probably had discussions about China's politics. Teo attended the Kuching CHMS from 1946 to 1949, when he switched to the English-medium St. Joseph's School and passed his Senior Cambridge examination within a year. Wong Syn Ted, his classmate at St. Joseph's, recognised his 'exceptional intelligence ... and early inclinations to socialism'.<sup>54</sup> Upon graduation, he taught English in his alma mater, the CHMS, until June 1950, when he resigned in protest over the management's decision to dismiss Chen Chao Fah, a history teacher, for introducing politics in his lessons.<sup>55</sup> In late 1950, Teo headed to Singapore, where he contacted the Malayan Communist Party (MCP).<sup>56</sup> Upon his return to Kuching by July 1953, he and Wen founded the Sarawak Liberation League (SLL) modelled on the MCP's satellite organisation in Singapore, the Anti-British League (ABL).<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Interview with Bong Kee Chok and Bong Kee Siaw, 4-5.1.2007.

<sup>53</sup> This paragraph is based on my interview with Teo Yong Kiaw, 6.3.2007. Additional details are separately footnoted.

<sup>54</sup> Abang Yusuf Puteh, *Who Shall Separate Us, Batu Lintang Teachers' College, 1949-1999* (Kuching: Shobra Publications Sdn. Bhd., 1999), p. 18.

<sup>55</sup> Chen Chao Fah's story was featured in NCJP, Singapore, 19.6.1950.

<sup>56</sup> Douglas Hyde however claims that he left Kuching in 1951. Hyde, *Guerrilla War*, pp. 64-67. Hyde's account is not entirely reliable. For example, he claims that Yong Jim eventually left for China and went blind there. He had in fact gone underground in Indonesia and turned into a successful business executive. He passed away in 1986. The date is important for most sources now claim that Yong Jim had gone to Singapore on the orders of SNDYL in late 1951. If he had left in 1950 and had kept in contact with Wen Ming Chyuan (in Miri), he would have done so in concert with the local-oriented splinter group within OCPYA. Interview with Teo Yong Kiaw, 6.3.2007.

<sup>57</sup> Douglas Hyde, Tim Hardy and Vernon Porritt claim that SLL was established in March 1954. However, Wen Ming Chyuan's 1965 document indicate that SLL was founded in July 1953. In my interviews with Bong Kee Chok and Tan Lee Seng, they remember joining SLL in late 1953. Porritt's

Teo's return fundamentally altered the course of Sarawak's socialist revolution. First, he instituted the ABL's secret cell organisation among the revolutionaries. Second, it was probably through Teo's study of the ABL's strategy in Singapore that a similar course for SLL was subsequently set. During his time in Kuching, Teo lived in an isolated attap house in Wen Ming Chyuan's hometown Kampong Maong. With SLL in place, Teo and Wen set about recruiting new members. One of the first members they recruited was Teo's younger brother, Yong Kiaw, as the latter recalled:

That was when I was in Junior Middle Three [in school], that is 1953.

One day, Wen Ming Chyuan brought me to Kampong Maong, where he and my Third Brother (Yong Jim) had built a very small attap house, the walls were all made of wooden planks, the roof attap. There, the front door was locked, while the back was bolted from the inside. Then, Wen Ming Chyuan knocked a few times on the front door to signal the secret code, my Third Brother opened the backdoor, we went round the back, and from there entered the house.

At that time I was full of surprise to see my Third Brother since we had not met for three to four years. Then, Wen Ming Chyuan asked, "Now we want you to join the Liberation League. Do you agree?" I said I agreed, and then I took the oath.

My brother spoke straight to my face, "We may be brothers, but today you are here to join the organisation, ours is a relationship between the superior and subordinate, not of brothers, we are talking about revolutionary careers. If you want to enter the organisation, you must be prepared to sacrifice your life, to follow the discipline, regulations and constitution, etc. of the organisation." Finally I signed my name, and in the face of Marx and Lenin portraits I swore an oath. Then, they distributed some documents, the 'Disciplinary Code' (严密细则) and 'Constitution' for my reading.<sup>58</sup>

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list of 'founder members... Wen Ming Chyuan, Wong Fuk Ing, Lam Wah Kwai, Bong Kee Chok, Qiu Li Ben and Teo Yong Jim' is inaccurate: Qiu had left Sarawak for China through West Kalimantan by 1952, Bong would join SLL as Wen's subordinate only in late 1953, while Lam would not enter the 'organisation' until after March 1955. See Hyde, *Guerrilla War*, pp. 64-67. Hardy, *Danger Within*, p. 3; Porritt, *Communism in Sarawak*, p. 17 and interviews with Bong Kee Chok and Bong Kee Siaw, 4-5.1.2007; Lim Ho Kui, 7.3.2007.

<sup>58</sup> Interview with Teo Yong Kiaw, 6.3.2007. That would be the last time the brothers met until 1986 when Yong Jim suddenly appeared in Kuching, a successful businessman under the guise of a new Indonesian identity.

One other task Yong Jim undertook was the training of SLL's Sibu cell, headed by Lui How Ming. Lui had gone to Sibu, Sarawak's next largest town, under the orders of Wen to extend SNDYL's network. Some time in 1954, Lui received orders to take his entire leadership cell to Kuching for a 'conversion course'. In the Kampong Maong hut, Teo gave lectures, presumably about the new form and political line of SLL, to Lui and two of his subordinates. Interestingly, Lui remembers Teo assiduously studying the colonial civics textbook *Sarawak and its Government*.<sup>59</sup> The textbook meant for educating the colonised peoples about the merits of British governance was being studied for its subversion.

Some time in 1954, Teo Yong Jim left Sarawak, SLL and the revolution to the sole charge of Wen Ming Chyuan. The most plausible explanation for his departure is that they had differed over SLL's policy. Local writer Li Zhenyuan argues that Yong Jim had wanted to subsume SLL under MCP guidance, whereas Wen Ming Chyuan wished SLL to remain a purely local affair.<sup>60</sup> Yet Bong Kee Chok refutes this theory. According to Bong, neither the CCP nor the MCP would have agreed, from the very start, to lead Sarawak's revolution from a distance. Both parties had suffered losses under policies dictated either by the Comintern or Comintern representatives. They would have insisted that Sarawak led its own indigenous revolution.<sup>61</sup> In retrospect, whatever the merits of the debate that went on between the two, Wen would most probably have prevailed, given his control of the former SNDYL contacts. It is perhaps safe to assume that the line of debate that won was the revolutionary course Wen took thereon.

### **3.4 The Masses' Line in the 30 March 1955 Strike**

Under the direct aid and guidance of the Malayan Communist Party-led Anti-British League, SLL was founded in July 1953. The founding of the League symbolised the entry of the Sarawak revolution into a new phase. The League unequivocally recognised Marxism-Leninism and Mao Tse-tung Thought as its guiding philosophy, accepted the organisational experience of the MCP, and absorbed both positive and

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<sup>59</sup> Interview with Lui How Ming, 10.1.2007. Hugh Hickling, *Sarawak and its Government: A First Book in Civics*, (Kuching: Government Printing Office, 1954).

<sup>60</sup> Li, 'Stormy Times (40 and 41): The Sarawak Liberation League (1 and 2)' in SIT, 28-29.8.2006. Li does not cite his source for this information.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with Bong Kee Chok, 5-6.1.2007.

negative lessons of Y and X [the Overseas Chinese Progressive Youth League and Sarawak New Democratic Youth League]. In the early stages of development, [the League] placed special emphasis on building up the organisation ... on organisational discipline and strict procedures in underground conditions. At the same time, [the League] enhanced the education of members' thoughts and stipulated a reading list of compulsory documents and Marx, Lenin and Mao works. This ensured the League's steady growth. The League devised the political direction, 'Set our hands free to mobilise the masses. Actively launch revolution', and opposed the 'Be wary of Struggle, Passive Revolution' line of thought. (This line of thought was prevalent during the early stages of the League's establishment.) With the aim of nurturing cadres for the revolution, the League placed emphasis on the students' movement during the early stages, hence the establishment of the satellite organisation 'Sarawak Advanced Youth Association'.<sup>62</sup>

The early years (1953-5) were a time of consolidation. The most significant change to the organisation was its implementation of the ABL template of the triangular cell system. Previously, SNDYL had managed its cadres more loosely with no strictly enforced 'Disciplinary Code' and on the basis of one-to-one contacts. Now, great emphasis was placed on secrecy. Members were strictly forbidden from contacting other comrades than their directly subordinate cells, their cell mates, and their immediate superior. Within the organisation, members used only their nom-de-guerre. As stated above, more emphasis was placed on indoctrination.

Wen Ming Chyuan maintained a highly rigorous policy of recruitment from the start. According to Bong Kee Chok, Wen set strict rules restricting membership to people with 'clean' backgrounds. Those with complex social relations, such as previous SNDYL members who had been 'exposed' during the October Twenty-ninth Strike in 1951, were excluded. The early SLL consisted of a small circle of Kuching CHMS students, highly trained in Marxist-Leninist theories. Other than Lin Yonglun (林永伦), a discipline master of the 17<sup>th</sup> Mile (Simmangang Road) Chung Hwa Public School, most early members were Kuching CHMS students. According to Douglas Hyde, there were nineteen Communist cells in Sarawak, the majority in the Kuching Chung Hwa Middle School and a few in Sibu, with a total of about one hundred members by the end of 1954.<sup>63</sup> This figure appears to have been an overestimate, probably by including the members of the Teachers' Association. Until 1955, SLL

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<sup>62</sup> Wen, 'Historical Outline'.

<sup>63</sup> Hyde, *Guerrilla Warfare*, p. 67.

members included Wang Fuk Ing (王馥英), who married Wen in 1960, Bong Kee Chok (黄纪作), Bong Kee Siaw (黄纪晓), Fong Moi Kee (洪梅枝), Tan Lee Seng (陈礼森), Ang Cho Teng (洪楚庭), Lai Jieyuan (赖介元) and Chen Jinmei (陈金美). In Sibü, Lui How Ming led a small budding group. They would form the core leadership of the League under the undisputed control of Wen Ming Chyuan.

Wen Ming Chyuan reported, in 1965, that the lessons learnt from the failure of the October Twenty-ninth Strike were the ‘organisational flaws and political naiveté’ of SNDYL and its ‘unduly left’ struggle.<sup>64</sup> After some two and a half years of reform and consolidation, how would Wen carry the revolution forward from 1955? ‘Set our hands free to mobilise the masses. Actively launch revolution.’ In short, they would follow the ‘masses’ line’. This line of action would be tested in an SLL-led students strike, which lasted for forty-seven days from 30 March to 16 May.

To analyse the role SLL played in the strike, it will be necessary to first give a brief account of the sequence of events that took place in the public domain. On 26 February 1955, at the weekly school assembly, the monitors of Class B, Junior Middle Two (Lower Standard), Wong Chock Yin (王祚英) and Zhuang Jin Ming (庄金明) called for their math teacher, Chai Yun Chee (蔡永祺) to improve his teaching methods, which they criticised as ‘too slow, incomprehensible, [and] negligent of students’ homework’.<sup>65</sup> The monitors entered negotiations with the school, but Chai prevented them from giving the school assembly an update the following week, accusing the monitors of being ‘impostor leaders’, who were ‘finding an excuse to create unrest’. Incensed, the students demanded an explanation from the principal, Huang Zhong Jin (黄中廛), who deferred until the third day (10 March), when the students declared the same afternoon as the final deadline. From the students’ perspective, the principal gave an ‘incomplete and ambiguous’ answer. Huang retaliated the next afternoon with a notice declaring that the monitors and Zhang

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<sup>64</sup> Wen, ‘Historical Outline’.

<sup>65</sup> The narrative is based on five documents issued by strike leaders published in Fong Hon Kah, ‘Historical Documents of the 30 March 1955 Chung Chung Students’ Strike’ in SIT, 17.12.2006. An account summarised from contemporary *Sarawak Tribune* and *Chinese Daily News* reports can be found in Chin Ung-ho, *Chinese Politics in Sarawak: A Study of the Sarawak United People’s Party* (Kuala Lumpur: OUP, 1997), pp. 42-3; TNA: PRO CO 1030/242, SBPIR, March 1955; a Kuching CHMS teacher’s version in Liu, *Twenty Years*, pp. 145-9; and Stephen Yong, *A Life Twice Lived, A Memoir* (Kuching: Stephen Yong, 1998), pp. 134-5.

Benren (张本仁), another classmate who had ‘expressed opinions and doubts’ at the meeting, had been given ‘black marks’ for ‘creating trouble on the pretext of improving pedagogy’, ‘bullying the class into the blackmail action’ and ‘setting the principal a deadline’. After repeated appeals were turned down, the class petitioned the principal and the Board of Management on 14 March for the retraction of penalties and for the latter to ‘uphold justice’. This triggered Huang to summon the entire class individually for interrogation to identify the ‘culprits’.

On 16 March, the students made further appeals on behalf of their leaders and when ignored, Class B, Junior Middle Two (Lower) went on strike. On the same day, they convened the monitors and chairmen of all classes in school. The meeting elected an eight-man ‘All Students’ Representative Delegation’, headed by Bong Kee Chok, Yap Choon Ho (叶存厚) and Chen Sheng Xin (陈胜新). The delegation immediately pressed the management for ‘justice’. The management’s guarantee against any further punishment for the student leaders appeared to have appeased them until the principal objected. Huang ignored the management’s summon to hearings. Instead, he issued a public statement and led his entire staff to go on a three-day strike from 21-23 March. On 26 March, the students’ delegation rebutted the principal and for the first time called for his resignation. The next day, Huang in turn demanded that ‘2 students be expelled, 13 temporarily suspended and 16 to write letters of apology’. The management agreed and it was announced that school would resume on 30 March. At this point the delegation sent a boycott warning to the thirteen Chinese associations that formed the Board of Management. This went unheeded. Hence, on 30 March, the forty-seven day boycott started, with a consistent 157 out of 1300 students attending school. During the forty-seven days, student leaders organised tuition classes, picnics, excursions and regular meetings to keep the striking students updated on events. The conflict was eventually resolved only when an enquiry committee of the thirteen associations, led by Stephen Yong and Ong Kee Hui, decided in the students’ favour to call for the principal to resign on 27 April. Yong, a lawyer, and Ong, a businessman from the preeminent Ong clan were the future Secretary-General and Chairman of the Sarawak United People’s Party. Unfazed by their success, the students’ delegation declared the victory, not for themselves, but in the name of Chinese culture and education.



Why did this strike succeed? One major factor was SLL's behind-the-scenes organization, which ensured the strike remained under control and striking students united throughout the struggle. SLL's cell system that Wen Ming Chyuan controlled was put to trial. At the very top end of the hierarchy stood Wen and Wang Fuk Ing, both of whom had by then left the Kuching CHMS. To orchestrate the strike, Wen and Wang held frequent meetings with other SLL members, who were still in school.<sup>66</sup> Under Wen and Wang were two separate cells with distinct duties. The first consisted of Bong Kee Chok and Lai Jieyuan, charged with coordinating 'Open Front' work. Bong subsequently headed the 'eight-man delegation'. Bong Kee Siaw and Chen Jinmei led the second cell, which was tasked to coordinate the 'clandestine organisation' among the students.<sup>67</sup> Other key SLL members such as Tan Lee Seng, Fong Moi Kee and Ang Cho Teng managed their individual classes or standards from the underground, presumably coordinated by Kee Siaw's cell.<sup>68</sup> That SLL was in full control of the conflict from the start can be demonstrated by the fact that the two monitors of Class B, Junior Middle Two (Lower), who started the standoff with their criticism of the Mathematics teacher, had joined a study cell led by their classmate Tan Lee Seng. Zhang Benren, the third outspoken leader of the class, had been absorbed in SLL by Tan.<sup>69</sup> Bong Kee Siaw claims that even the minority who did not participate in the strike were in fact following the orders of SLL in order to 'keep an eye on the situation in school'.<sup>70</sup>

A second factor was SLL's policy of maintaining the 'masses' line', which meant sticking to the lowest common denominator public opinion could accept, while they made incremental tactical gains. Bong Kee Chok had a more concrete expression: always struggle 'with good reason, with advantage and with restraint' (有理有利有节).<sup>71</sup> Having witnessed the October 29<sup>th</sup> strike spiral into a call for an end to colonialism, SLL leaders were scrupulous in finding sufficient cause for exploitation and to keep their aims within achievable limits. For example, SLL had rescinded an

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<sup>66</sup> Interview with Fong Moi Kee, 16.1.2007.

<sup>67</sup> Interviews with Bong Kee Chok and Bong Kee Siaw, 5-6.1.2007.

<sup>68</sup> Interviews with Tan Lee Seng, 27.1.2007; Fong Moi Kee, 16.1.2007; and Ang Cho Teng, 25.1.2007.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Tan Lee Seng, 27.1.2007.

<sup>70</sup> Interview with Bong Kee Siaw, 5-6.1.2007. There is no corroboration for this claim, but I am doubtful that SLL managed to persuade every single student in school to its cause.

<sup>71</sup> Interview with Bong Kee Chok, 5-6.1.2007. This is a Mao quotation.

earlier attempt to exploit the principal's sex scandal in late 1954 when it was decided there was no strong basis for a strike.<sup>72</sup> When the strike broke out on 30 March, the students stuck to the consistent line that they had a legitimate concern for the inferior teaching methods of their Mathematics teacher, and made the consistent demand to replace the principal who had blatantly ignored their supposedly well-founded anxiety. The students were careful not to tread on the toes of the colonial state so the conflict remained to be resolved within the Chinese community. With the principal's attitude proving intransigent and his reputation already soiled by the earlier scandal, it was a short step from his loss of favour. SLL had, in essence, inched closer to its ultimate revolutionary goals by striving for interim objectives that could and did win the sympathies of the Chinese public.<sup>73</sup> This pragmatic approach to politics would set the pattern for its political leadership in subsequent years.

The goal, as Wen Ming Chyuan would recall, was to 'set our hands free to mobilise the masses [and] actively launch the revolution'. The real objective, hence, did not lie in ousting the principal but in politicising their fellow students in the Kuching CHMS through the activities that were organised during the forty-seven day period. Bong Kee Chok recalls:

During the strike, we organised many study cells: the seniors tutored the juniors, lessons continued, and our studies were hence not affected by the strike. On the other hand, after the lessons ended, of course [we] told some revolutionary stories and learnt some revolutionary theories. The basic one was about life's philosophy: what is man's purpose on earth? At that time, the whole world was rife with waves of student, labour and national independence movements. That was the atmosphere, without which honestly speaking we could not have organised ourselves. At that time Singapore's and Malaya's student movements were also developing quickly, they were everywhere. We (Sarawak) were not far behind...we learnt from Singapore. In this way the movement was galvanised. It was through holding these activities that we trained a large batch of cadres.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Interview with Bong Kee Chok, 5-6.1.2007. See also Liu, *Twenty Years*, p. 145 and Li, 'Stormy Times (42): 30 March Students' Strike (1)' in SIT, 30.8.2006.

<sup>73</sup> Stephen Yong's (chairman of the enquiry committee) account of the incident, for example, indicates his complete ignorance of the clandestine organization behind the student strikers at that time. See Yong, *A Memoir*, pp. 134-5.

<sup>74</sup> Interview with Bong Kee Chok, 5-6.1.2007.

While Bong set the direction of the movement from the ‘open front’ of the organisation, Fong Moi Kee mobilised her peers from inside the classrooms:

I was allocated to work on my class: short excursions, taught them to sing, dance and gave them tuition. Tuition was the most important as studies were not to be neglected. So through these cultural activities, singing progressive songs, mass dancing, telling stories, playing team games, we enlivened their spirits, strengthened their confidence, so that the team of strikers would not gradually disperse, we stuck together from start to end. Through cultural activities we organised and communicated. Then we made regular reports, the results of our student delegation’s negotiation, once we obtained news, we discussed it with our classmates.<sup>75</sup>

By late 1955, it began to dawn on SLL’s leaders that the number of students who had ‘turned progressive’ far exceeded all expectations. More than 1100 strikers took part in the strike. Yet until their grasp of Marxist-Leninist theories were enhanced and their commitment to ‘revolution’ tested, it would be risky to absorb all into SLL at once. SLL leaders hence devised a compromise solution in the latter half of 1955: to organise them through a satellite organisation – the Sarawak Advance Youth Association (砂拉越先进青年会, SAYA).<sup>76</sup> The SAYA adopted the same triangular cell structure and disciplinary code and was put directly under the leadership of SLL members. All referred to themselves as ‘O’ members, for ‘Organisation’, though SAYA members were kept in the dark about SLL. Like in SLL, SAYA members had to swear to strive for the ‘democracy and freedom’ of Sarawak, learn the ‘theories and principle of Marxism/Leninism and the ideology of Mao Tse Tung’ and offer their ‘whole li[ves] without the slightest hesitation’ to the revolution.<sup>77</sup>

Success in the strike also confirmed Bong Kee Chok’s place as the number two and ‘open front’ leader in SLL. Born in Sarawak in 1935, he grew up in a Hakka peasant family after the war in a village on the 29<sup>th</sup> Mile of Simanggang Road. Left-wing politics for him was not an intellectual choice but one determined by his birth into a Hakka peasant family (as opposed to his right-wing schoolmates with landlord

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<sup>75</sup> Interview with Fong Moi Kee, 16.1.2007.

<sup>76</sup> Interview with Bong Kee Siaw, 5-6.1.2007.

<sup>77</sup> ‘Form of Oath of Admittance’ in Hardy, *Danger Within*, p. 56.

origins in China), whose members were engaged in clandestine anti-Japanese activities during the occupation. Descending on Kuching to further his secondary education at the CHMS in 1949, Bong was immediately initiated into the world of left-wing literature and student activism as described in the first chapter. When Wen Ming Chyuan approached him to join SLL in late 1953, he readily agreed because it was an honour to be invited.<sup>78</sup> His emergence to head the student delegation indicates Bong had been groomed for ‘open front’ activities. Wen had probably recognised his rousing public speaking skills and sharp political instincts early on. Bong’s open leadership of the students brought him into contact with the chairpersons of the enquiry committee, Stephen Yong and Ong Kee Hui. Bong would work for a year as a clerk in Yong’s law firm before he joined SUPP in 1959.

## **Conclusion**

Their handling of the two students’ strikes of the Kuching CHMS, occurring less than four years apart from each other, underscored how the radical students had come to terms with the reality of fighting colonialism with their idealism, wits and bare hands. It was with sheer tenacity and belief in the cause of revolution that Wen Ming Chyuan, with the help of Teo Yong Jim, revived the revolutionary organisation within three years of its comprehensive defeat by the British colonial government. The success of the 30 March Strike created the 1955 generation of Sarawak revolutionaries. The strike proved not only the efficiency of the ‘organisation’, but political maturity of SLL in manipulating public opinion to their side. In Communist parlance, they had found the “masses’ line”. The next chapter analyses how SLL took the “masses’ line” and the anti-colonial struggle beyond the walls of their school and into society.

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<sup>78</sup> Interview with Bong Kee Chok, 5-6.1.2007.

## Chapter Four

### From *Minzu* to Nation: the Making of the United Front, 1956-63

The previous chapter showed how Kuching's radical students imported a revolutionary organisation, whose operational competence was then successfully experimented in a student's strike in March 1955. SLL systematically organised the hundreds of students who were radicalised in the strike into a satellite organisation – the SAYA. The period 1956-62, during which SLL/SAYA operated its 'united front', remains the best documented period in the history of Sarawak Communism. Scholars have argued that the success of the Communist united front in this period was built on the twin foundations of Communist organisation and Chinese communalism.<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, I argue that rather than communalism, it was *minzu*-nationalism combined with Communist leadership that accounted for the movement's rapid ascendance among Sarawak peoples. The introduction of racial politics with the imposition of the grand merger plan of 'Malaysia' increasingly narrowed the range of choices available for the SLL and eventually led it onto the route of violent revolution in late 1962.

#### 4.1 Laying the (Under)Groundwork, 1956-9

From the success of the 30 March 1955 Strike emerged the core leaders who would marshal the united front over the next seven years. Wen Ming Chyuan's position at the top of SLL remained unchallenged. Bong Kee Chok's deft political showmanship and effective organisation during the strike, coupled with the fact that he had been 'exposed' to the public, paved the way for his subsequent career in open front party politics. He would be number two in SLL hierarchy. The third man in the hierarchy was Guo Weizhong (郭伟忠). Guo was a classmate of an early member of SLL, Bong Kee Siaw. They were in Class One of the Junior Middle Three standard during the 1955 strike. Bong Kee Siaw absorbed Guo into SLL around March 1955.<sup>2</sup> Some time in 1956, Guo was promoted to the Organisation Bureau of the Central Committee. Guo headed the labour movement for a year before passing it to Lim Ho

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<sup>1</sup> Hardy, *Danger Within*, pp. 4-46; Porritt, *Communism in Sarawak*, Chapters 2-4; Van der Kroef, 'Chinese Communism and Communalism'; Chin, *Chinese Politics*, Chapter Three.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Bong Kee Siaw, 5-6.1.2007.

Kui in 1957.<sup>3</sup> Between 1956 and 1959, he was also head of the students' movement<sup>4</sup> and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division Committee. From 1957 to 1962, Wen, Bong and Guo controlled the Organisation Bureau, which functioned as the equivalent of the Politburo in a communist party.<sup>5</sup>

Guo Weizhong, Wang Fuk Ing, Lin Yong Lun and Lim Ho Kui (林和贵) functioned as a second-tier cell within the Central Committee. It is not clear what other responsibilities Wang held, besides chairing the Third and Fourth Division Committees at various times.<sup>6</sup> Ostensibly, she was a schoolteacher with the Kuching Chung Hwa Primary School (Number 3) after she graduated from the senior middle school in 1954. Lin Yong Lun was a contemporary of the SNYDL leaders during the 1951 strike. Between 1952 and 1954, he became the Discipline Master at the 17<sup>th</sup> Mile Simmangang Road Chung Hwa Public School, an area known locally as 'Little Yen-an'. During a stand-off between the school's directors and the colonial government over alleged communist indoctrination in late 1954, Lin actively orchestrated the school's resistance from underground.<sup>7</sup> Exactly when he joined SLL is unclear, but by 1956-7, he was in charge of the peasants' movement – an indication of his years of experience in the countryside. Lim Ho Kui arrived late but rose quick in SLL hierarchy. Born in Kuching in 1936 to a Hokkien working class family, Lim could only afford his education through part-time work and scholarships he won with his excellent academic results. It was in 1955 when he met his junior middle three classmate, Guo Weizhong, that he first came in touch with left-wing literature. Guo would absorb Lim into the SAYA in mid-1955. Within four months, he was promoted into the SLL and put in charge of one-third of the underground students' movement. By early 1957, Lim was promoted again to SLL's 'Central Committee' as head of the labour movement and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division Committee.<sup>8</sup> This team would spearhead SLL's 'united front' policy between 1957 and June 1962.

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with Fong Moi Kee, 16.1.2007. Fong, who was his direct subordinate, in turn led the 'Labour Movement Core Directing Cell' (工运核心领导小组) during the period 1956-1957.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Bong Kee Siaw, 5-6.1.2007. Bong was a member of this committee.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Lim Ho Kui, 7.3.2007. Lim used the term 'Directing Cell' (领导小组) for this group. It was most likely the 'Organisation Bureau of the National Central Committee' referred to in Hardy, *Danger Within*, p. 25.

<sup>6</sup> Interviews with Ang Cho Teng, 25.1.2007, and Tan Lee Seng, 27.2.2007.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Voon Chang Liew, 31.1.2007. Voon was a 17<sup>th</sup> Mile local who was taught by Lin.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Lim Ho Kui, 7.3.2007.

With its position in Kuching secured by 1957, SLL began to pay more attention to its organisation in Sibul and Miri. Like Kuching before 1956, SLL's presence in Sibul and Miri was limited to Chinese middle schools. In both towns, SLL members in Chinese middle schools instigated boycotts in 1956 but failed to mobilise their school mates on as widespread a scale as their Kuching counterparts as they suffered relatively poor leadership and a colonial government more determined to put down student unrest after 30 March 1955. In consequence, SLL's leadership in Sibul and Miri had become fragmented and their followers despondent by 1957. In this context, SLL despatched two of its top cadres – Ang Cho Teng and Tan Lee Seng – to Sibul and Miri respectively. Both Tan and Ang had been inducted into SLL in its early years and were senior leaders by the time of the 1955 strike. Ang set sail for Sibul in November 1957, and upon arrival found the remnant SLL members split into different factions. By early 1959, Ang had consolidated the students' movement, infiltrated the local trade unions, and instituted a rigorous and systematic scheme of indoctrination. Sometime in mid-1958, Tan moved to Miri, where he concentrated on strengthening the students' movement.<sup>9</sup>

Besides the students' movement, a particularly effective arm of SLL's 'united front' was the labour movement headed by Lim Ho Kui. One of the reasons for Lim's nomination to head the labour movement might have been his proletariat origins. Lim's father was a stevedore at the Kuching Wharf, while his mother worked as a cleaner for the colonial watering hole - the Sarawak Club. During his school days and despite winning scholarships, Lim had to take on several odd-jobs to make ends meet. He was hence familiar with the demands and needs of the working class. From 1956,<sup>10</sup> SLL/SAYA members graduating from the Kuching CHMS began to infiltrate the Kuching trade unions as secretaries and clerks. Occupying the administrative posts enabled SLL/SAYA members to exert influence over trade union policies. From behind the scenes, Lim Ho Kui steered the labour movement in four directions. First, Lim made the material needs of the workers top priority for the unions: pushing for shorter working hours, negotiating better wages, and providing unemployment benefits and funeral services. Second, SLL/SAYA members introduced cultural activities to educate and entertain the workers. These activities ranged from choral

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<sup>9</sup> Interviews with Ang Cho Teng, 25.1.2007, and Tan Lee Seng, 27.2.2007.

<sup>10</sup> But according to Hardy, *Danger Within*, p. 15, SLL started infiltrating trade unions in 1954.

singing, mass dancing, to free education in the Trade Unions Free Night School (est.1959). Third, he presided over a period of expansion and consolidation. One of the most powerful unions at this time was the newly overhauled Kuching Employees' and Labourers' Union (est. 1957, KELU), which represented more than 1,600 Chinese shop-house assistants by 1959. Last and most important, Lim instituted two communications systems – one official, the other underground – modelled after the pyramidal hierarchy of SLL/SAYA. Through the underground network, workers were initiated into the revolutionary world of SLL/SAYA. At its peak, according to SLL's estimates, the labour movement controlled more than 4,000 workers in the capital city, a stand-by army ready to be mobilised whenever numbers and manpower were needed.<sup>11</sup>

Hence, by mid-1959, SLL/SAYA had firmly consolidated its organisation in the three major cities of Sarawak. Each central committee member assumed on average two portfolios: a particular branch of 'united front' work and a particular Division Committee. Each division was in turn divided into various sub-areas and towns, which were managed by area/town committees. On these sat no more than four members, each charged with a particular aspect of united front work (students, labour, party, etc.). These cells spread downwards like a pyramid into the deepest and most remote corners of society. From the central committee, directives and new learning materials were disseminated down the hierarchy while reports of ground conditions were regularly passed upwards. The organisation multiplied with such tenacity that when its full extent was uncovered in the early 1960s, the colonial Information Officer charged with writing a book about it almost called it the 'Cancer Within'.<sup>12</sup>

While SLL/SAYA had secured critical footholds in public institutions, especially those in the cities, they had yet to acquire a mass following among the population. The attempt to capture this crowd started on 1 August 1956 when Lin Guixing, Tay Chok Chong, Chan Siaw Hee and Chin Shaw Tung founded Sarawak's

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<sup>11</sup> Interviews with Lim Ho Kui, 7.3.2007; Fong Moi Kee, 16.1.2007; Chan Boon Ho, Lam Wan Shin and Tan Choon Hock, 8.1.2007. The Sibulabour movement was equally popular, active and organised under Ang Cho Teng's and Mr. Ho's leadership. Interviews with Ang Cho Teng, 25.1.2007 and Mr. Ho, 21.1.2007.

<sup>12</sup> Alistair Morrison, *Fair Land Sarawak: some recollections of an expatriate official* (Ithaca, New York: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1993), p. 121.



first left-wing Chinese medium, local-oriented newspaper, the *Sin Wen Pau* (SWP).<sup>13</sup> Wen Ming Chyuan, the leader of SLL, then joined SWP as editor of the international news desk in December 1956. Wen would have the major say in editorial policy from 1957 to June 1960, when he moved on to assume the post of SUPP's Propaganda and Education Secretary. He was succeeded by Yap Choon Ho, who had been a key member of the student delegation during the 30 March 1955 strike. In early 1957, Bong Kee Siaw received orders to absorb him directly into SLL, leapfrogging the stage of apprenticeship in the SAYA.<sup>14</sup> Upon his graduation from senior middle school in June 1957, Yap entered SWP and would assume its editorship after Wen's departure in 1959.<sup>15</sup> Many more SLL/SAYA members would enter SWP in subsequent years as writers, editors, print workers and even delivery boys. Not only did SWP function as a mouthpiece of SLL, its premises also served as a meeting place where the older generation leftist shareholders such as Chan Siaw Hee and Chin Shaw Tung interacted with Wen and his youthful charges, and where major political issues were debated, then editorialised. SWP was a virtual intellectual *salon* of Sarawak's socialist revolution.<sup>16</sup>

#### 4.2 From the Foundations of Discrete *Minzu*

That the left-wing Chinese aimed to make a clean break with the 'Chinese sojourner' mentality of the past was unashamedly declared in its mission statement on its maiden issue of SWP:

The result of detaching culture from its *minzu* system and the continuous growth of the particular *minzu* culture, is increasing divisiveness between *minzu* and *minzu*. Hence the arduous long term task of the cultural circles is not only to develop our own *minzu* culture,

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<sup>13</sup> Lin and another editor had crossed over from the right-wing *Chung Hwa Daily*. It should be recalled that Tay was a SNDYL leader in the October 1951 strike; Chan had dabbled in Wu Chan's Anti-Fascist SLL during the war; Chin, one of the Anti-Fascist SLL leaders, was the so-called 'Director of the underground education department'. These were the major share-holders of the newspaper. See Chan, *A Memoir*, pp. 56-60. Tay was to be deported under the 'Undesirable Persons Ordinance' on 8 December 1956 as the Special Branch 'suspected (he was the) Head of the subversive activities in the First and Second Divisions'. TNA: CO 1030/242: SBIPR, November 1956.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Bong Kee Siaw, 5-6.1.2007.

<sup>15</sup> Liyun, *Reminiscing* (Hong Kong: Tien-ma Publishing Ltd., 2003), p. 9. The author is Yap's widow.

<sup>16</sup> Chan, *A Memoir*, pp. 56-60. This early alliance forged between the old and young leftists at SWP would later on be replicated in the leadership of SUPP, steering it in a militant leftist direction and deterring the moderates (Stephen Yong and Ong Kee Hui) from deviating towards the centre until 1970.

but more important, is to support and assist in normalising the growth of all *minzu* cultures, that is to bring about the harmony of the three major *minzu* (Chinese, Malay, Dayak) and the unity of the three major *minzu*.<sup>17</sup>

Yet SWP, being published in the Chinese medium, was aware of its inaccessibility to the other peoples of Sarawak. Hence, the ‘concrete’ short-term mission was confined to the ‘responsibilities it had to bear towards ethnic Chinese culture and the Chinese sojourner society’:

To open up a land of happiness for the bitter labouring masses, to lead the bitter labouring masses in the search for freedom and joy, to assist the labouring masses in uplifting their living standards, to publicise the demands of the masses, to organise cultural circles, and to nurture young writers... until now, no other publication has raised or paid attention to these problems...<sup>18</sup>

The mass appeal of this paradigm shift in Chinese political orientation was evident in the rising circulation of the newspaper. SWP quickly gained a First Division-wide readership as distribution centres were set up on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Mile along the Kuching-Serian Road. Newspaper distribution was aided by the fact that one of its proprietors, Chan Siaw Hee, was also the major shareholder of the Sarawak Transport Company – a 160-bus fleet plying Sarawak’s First and Second Divisions. Both Wen Ming Chyuan and Chin Shaw Tung also became minor shareholders.<sup>19</sup> The daily distribution of newspapers to rural Sarawak was a revolution in itself. Day-to-day newspaper reading, hitherto the privilege of the urban elite, now became accessible to the rural masses. To further widen the readership to the Third and Fourth Divisions, SLL established *Min Chong Pao* and *Sa Min Pao* in Sibu (25 April 1960) and Miri (11 February 1961) respectively. At its peak, the three papers had a combined circulation of 7000 copies daily.<sup>20</sup> While the figure works out to a readership of one in ten Chinese-literate people,<sup>21</sup> the actual readership must be many times higher for newspapers were not only circulated within the family but in public

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<sup>17</sup> ‘On the Mission of SWP’ in: *A Collection of Sin Wen Pao Editorials* (Kuching: Sin Wen Pau, 1962), p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Chan, *A Memoir*, pp. 47-55.

<sup>20</sup> Hardy, *Danger Within*, p. 36-7.

<sup>21</sup> There were 69,572 Chinese literate people in 1960. Jones, *1960 Population Census*, p. 81.

places such as coffee-shops, grocery stores and youth clubs.<sup>22</sup> The combination of synchronised editorial policies, ready capital, a disciplined workforce and an efficient distribution network created an ‘imagined community’ of shared interests among the Sarawak Chinese.<sup>23</sup>

Then in 1958, Wen Ming Chyuan himself set about reaching out to the Dayak peasantry when a *Minzu* Works Sub-Committee was set up under the Central Committee in 1958.<sup>24</sup> Committee members included Bong Kee Chok, his wife Lui How Ying (雷皓莹), and Yap Choon Ho. The seniority of the cadres appointed to this department, and Wen’s personal direction, indicated SLL’s emphasis on integrating the Dayak peasantry into the ‘united front’. The committee spent several days surveying the First Division border region with Indonesia and a policy was devised by 1959. This survey seemed to have persuaded the Sub-Committee that real ‘historical’ barriers, which they attributed to the colonial policy of ‘divide and rule’, existed between the Chinese cadres and the Dayak peasantry. The policy was hence for *minzu* cadres to simply live among the Dayaks, familiarise themselves with Dayak culture, try to gain their trust, and indoctrinate them with socialist theories when the opportunity arose. Some of the best cadres in the Kuching CHMS were hand-picked for *minzu* works training,<sup>25</sup> which included learning theories relating to *minzu* problems, some rudiments of the Iban/Bidayuh languages and life skills such as rubber tapping, hairdressing, watch-repairing, and basic medical skills. As plans for starting a political party gathered pace in 1959, Wen, Bong and Yap left the committee to the charge of Guo Weizhong, Lui How Ying, Liu Zijin (刘紫金) and Zhang Benren (张本仁). The highly centralised organisational structure of this branch of the ‘united front’ works indicated its significance to overall SLL policy: whereas other branches in the ‘united front’ such as labour, students and the political party

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<sup>22</sup> Interview with Tan Lee Seng, 27.1.2007. Tan, for example, read his left-wing newspapers at the family sundry store. Interview with Lui How Ming, 10.1.2007. Lui read his radical newspapers at a photo studio in Miri. Youth clubs were another major venue where people went to read newspapers.

<sup>23</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

<sup>24</sup> Information in this paragraph, unless otherwise footnoted, is based on Huai Yuan, ‘*Minzu* Work in the early period’ and Yang Chuan Xing, ‘Reviewing the initiation of *minzu* works in the First and Second Divisions’ in *In Search of Footprints in the Land of Natives* (Bintulu: Yu Chin Lük, 2007), pp. 57-76. Yang claims the Sub-Committee was set up a year earlier in 1957.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Bong Kee Siaw, 5-6.1.2007. Bong Kee Siaw who was on the Student Movement’s Committee remembers nominating school cadres to the *minzu* works department.

were subsumed under the individual Divisional Committees, *minzu* works cells in the field reported directly to the Kuching-based Sub-Committee.

In this way, when the 1955 Chinese middle school generation left school, they became human carriers of a revolutionary network, extending it to wherever their new careers brought them. Some had their career choices dictated by the needs of the revolution. The *minzu* cadres left the comfort of the cities for the upriver longhouses (especially along the Rejang and Baram), disguised as barbers, entrepreneurs, mechanics or even peasants. Others followed the traditional career paths of Chinese middle school graduates and ended up as clerks, teachers and business apprentices. Yet all were revolutionaries, setting up secret study cells wherever their work took them in order to propagate visions of a new Sarawak to the masses. By 1959, with the extension of SLL/SAYA network across most of Sarawak, the stage was set for an open contest for the power to re-define the nation fundamentally.

### **4.3 Towards A United People's Party**

The Chinese society is the most stratified, followed by the Malays, while the Dayaks have no such obvious stratifications. The capital-owning bankers, trading firm bosses and other entrepreneurs can be categorised as the nationalist bourgeoisie (The Chinese are in the absolute majority among those in this class, but we have no reason to consider them as the nationalist bourgeoisie of that particular race [i.e. British]); those who run small businesses or such people as hawkers are categorised as the 'petit bourgeoisie', within this class are further divisions by wealth, the poorer petit bourgeoisie are in the absolute majority; the working class in Sarawak is considered a smaller class at present. The special characteristics and contradictions between these classes need not be explained here.

Among the class of peasantry, the Dayaks are in the absolute majority, (they have almost no class division among themselves, all of them being peasants) followed by the Chinese and the Malay peasants. The challenge of Sarawak's peasantry is in reality a *minzu* problem, both of which cannot be treated separately. The internal division within this class is simpler and hence easier to handle.<sup>26</sup>

Wen Ming Chyuan's 1958 New Year's Day SWP editorial ended with an important message: the time was ripe for the founding of a political party in Sarawak

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<sup>26</sup> *Sin Wen Pao Editorials*, p. 5.

to lead the struggle for independence.<sup>27</sup> The message revealed Wen's early intention to form a united front of all ethnic groups and social classes in an anti-British political front. The assessments made regarding the Dayak groups were that as a peasant class, they would be 'revolutionary' in their nature and that their slowness to mobilise was due essentially to a *minzu* problem. What was this *minzu* problem? It should be recalled that the initial survey in 1958 by the *Minzu* Works Committee had revealed insurmountable linguistic and cultural barriers between the Dayaks and SLL's Chinese cadres, hence negating the option of infiltrating the longhouses more directly. The assumption made by Wen was that once the linguistic and cultural barriers had been breached, the Dayak peoples could be easily won over. An open political party, where mobilisation of the Dayak masses could take place freely and openly, would be SLL's answer to the *minzu* barrier.

It was in this context that Wen agreed to Chan Siaw Hee's and Stanley Wong Cheng Ting's (黄增霆, from Sibu) proposals for the formation of Sarawak's first political party some time in 1958.<sup>28</sup> Wen's objective would be revealed more clearly in an internal SLL/SAYA document, 'On the Formation of an Open Political Party and the Struggle for Independence', circulated one year later, in early 1959. This document argued that SLL had hitherto been 'unable to break out and adopt a higher form to mobilise the masses'. With a political party, it would be able to mobilise the masses openly and struggle for independence. Finally, the document asserted that workers and farmers should play the leading role in the party, but admitted that 'the propertied class' would have 'more influence...in the early stages'.<sup>29</sup>

By the time the Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP) was founded on 4 June 1959, some four years of preparatory work had gone into consolidating SLL's control of the grassroots. It was with the unspoken blessing of SLL/SAYA machinery that the ostensibly 'propertied class' members of the SUPP Central Committee built a multi-racial mass party almost overnight. One SUPP branch stood out over the rest – the Kuching Branch – which was administratively led by its Secretary Bong Kee Chok,

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Chan, *A Memoir*, pp. 119-125. This Chinese-educated group then approached the English-educated moderates, Stephen Yong and Ong Kee Hui, the latter especially for his contacts with the indigenous Council Negri members. See Yong, *Memoir*, pp. 155-9 and Ong, *Memoirs*, 421-5.

<sup>29</sup> Hardy, *Danger Within*, pp. 25-27.

with Wen Ming Chyuan joining as an ordinary Branch Committee member. Under the leadership of Bong, SUPP founded Kuching sub-branches in Matang, 24<sup>th</sup> Mile (Simanggang Road), Batu Kawa, 7<sup>th</sup> Mile, 10<sup>th</sup> Mile, 17<sup>th</sup> Mile, Nonok and Pangkalan Ampat, all eight within the first year.<sup>30</sup> Overall party membership rose from 3,627 in 1959 to 46,471 in 1962, almost half of whom were non-Chinese.<sup>31</sup> Various authors have discussed the subject of ‘Communist’ infiltration in or Chinese ‘Communist’ dominance of SUPP.<sup>32</sup> Yet to the grassroots participants, the movement created an unprecedented, and indeed unsurpassed, historical moment when inter-ethnic political intercourse was no longer the privilege of the elite but had become a popular, day-to-day phenomenon. Pictures of mass rallies, anniversary carnivals, and branch meetings that survive from the period show seas of heads and thousands of raised fists, amidst what must have been deafening echoes of ‘Sa’ati’ (SUPP party slogan: literally ‘one heart’). The formation of branches, which involved the election of local leaders to branch positions and regular meetings, penetrated SUPP’s political message into the grassroots.

#### **4.4 The Communalisation of Sarawak Politics**

The prospect of a Chinese-led and Communist-infiltrated multi-racial mass-based political party jolted the Sarawak colonial government into reaction. In fact, from July 1955, the colonial Chief Secretary, John Ellis, and then Governor Anthony Abell had encouraged and helped Ong Kee Hui persuade the unofficial Council Negri members to form a multi-racial political party. But, as Ong speculates, Abell withdrew his endorsement sometime in February 1959, causing Temenggong Jugah (Paramount Chief of the Rejang Ibans) to become wary of SUPP.<sup>33</sup> Abell then went public with his concern on 28 May 1959, a week before SUPP was founded:

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<sup>30</sup> Chua Chung Toi, Teng L.C. David, Sim Kheng Hwee, Bong Kee Lin, *The Story of SUPP* (Kuching: Research and Resource Centre SUPP Headquarters, 1989), pp. 143-4.

<sup>31</sup> Sarawak United People’s Party Historical Materials, *To Grow in Struggle, Tuan Jie Bao Special Edition, 15, 1959-1962* (Kuching: Organ of SUPP, 1962), p. 73. In Michael Leigh’s study of political party formation in Sarawak, he concludes that the ‘SUPP, though recruiting many Dayaks throughout the state, is Chinese controlled’. Only 4 sub-branches out of 52 branches and sub-branches were not controlled by Chinese. See Leigh, *Rising Moon*, pp. 17 and 21.

<sup>32</sup> Chin, *Chinese Politics*, p. 51; Porritt, *Communism in Sarawak*, chapter 4.

<sup>33</sup> Ong, *Memoirs*, pp. 416-422.

It is...essential that politics should not cause any further divisions in our community but should have a unifying and binding effect. If a party tends to be dominated by one race or class...it may have a disintegrating effect on our community...I frankly doubt if political parties at the present stage of development will spell faster progress in this small country.<sup>34</sup>

The colonial government's intervention set the tone for the stereotyping of SUPP as a Chinese political party and prevented more prominent native leaders from joining it. In fact the government gave tacit endorsement to the subsequent formation of parties driven by ethnic interests. Abang Haji Mustapha, the Datu Bandar and a government civil servant, was given three months leave to start the Party Negara Sarawak (PANAS) in April 1960. The primary aim of the party was 'to protect, safeguard, support, foster and promote the political, educational, religious, economic, social and cultural interests of the indigenous people of Sarawak particularly and of the Ra'ayat of Sarawak generally'.<sup>35</sup> As Michael Leigh comments, '(t)he very name of PANAS, literally translated as 'the party of the state of Sarawak', had an official ring – in contrast to SUPP, which had placed its stress upon being the united people's party'.<sup>36</sup> Sarawak would witness the founding of four more communal parties in the next three years.

It was in this racially charged climate that the colonial government began moves to convert all state aided Chinese middle schools to the English medium. Declassified British files show that when the colonial government first offered funding aids to the hitherto private Chinese schools through the Grant Code in 1956, the entire system had already been identified as a target for control and change. In October 1954, Abell wrote to the Colonial Office to state his case for the planned additional expenditure on Chinese schools:

I am satisfied that the extent and character of anti-British feeling among young Chinese, and the extent to which the loyalties of the Peking Government have been substituted for the local loyalties which have so happily characterized the attitude of the Overseas Chinese in Sarawak for many generations, is infinitely greater than any previous developments of this kind. There is now developing in Sarawak a

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<sup>34</sup> Leigh, *Rising Moon*, p. 14.

<sup>35</sup> Object no. 1 of the PANAS constitution, quoted from *ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

dangerous form of hostility to the territory's established Government and the hub and centre of the activities which create this hostility is the Chinese School system.<sup>37</sup>

Yet Chinese demand for education, fuelled by the post-war baby boom, far exceeded the state finances of the colonial government. In the three years after taking over Chinese school finances, the colonial government introduced various schemes to limit the growth of Chinese demand for education, culminating in the appointment of the David McLellan commission to recommend a final solution to Sarawak's education problems. The 1959 McLellan Report ostensibly pointed to the need for reforms in Chinese middle schools due to their communal outlook, China-oriented curriculum, and its dislocation with the employment needs of the local economy.<sup>38</sup> Yet in a separate note to the Colonial Office, McLellan revealed the underlying motive for the Chinese middle school reforms:

It is necessary first of all to determine what the general policy is to be towards the Chinese community in general and Chinese education in particular, since it is only amongst the Chinese that there is any noticeable attraction to Communism. Is it to be repressive or constructive?...For obvious reasons no Colonial Government could even consider general repressive measures against the Chinese community but a case might be made for direct action against their predominantly alien education system...<sup>39</sup>

In December 1960, Governor Alexander Waddell adopted McLellan's recommendations. Introducing the 'National Education Plan' in the Council Negri, he argued that 'multi-racial schools can only function satisfactorily if there is a common medium of instruction', citing the negative example of Chinese schools, which 'automatically excludes children of all other races'.<sup>40</sup> The bill threatened to withdraw funding to schools that refused to convert their teaching medium to the English language. In January 1961, the Chinese middle school managements were given four months to take a stand or lose state funding. Writers who label Chinese resistance to the 'Ten Year Conversion Plan' as a sign of 'cultural chauvinism' and 'communist instigation' tend to ignore this political context under which the 'Conversion Plan'

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<sup>37</sup> TNA: PRO CO 1030/267: Abell to Boyd, 22.10.1954.

<sup>38</sup> D. McLellan, *Report on Secondary Education 1959, Sarawak* (Kuching: Government Printing Office, 1960).

<sup>39</sup> TNA: PRO CO 1030/422: 'Notes of on Subversion in Sarawak Schools', 6.11.1959.

<sup>40</sup> *A Guide to Education in Sarawak* (Kuching: Government Printing Office, 1961), pp. 54-5.



was shoved down the throat of the Chinese community.<sup>41</sup> It was essentially a plan to buy out the sixty-year old private school system with four years of state funding, the finances of which in any case had been drawn mainly from taxing Chinese economic activities.

The coordinated response from the ‘united front’ was on one hand to articulate and defend its conception of *minzu*-nationalism for post-colonial Sarawak’s education system, and on the other to steel up the school managements’ resolve to resist the ‘conversion plan’ through the organisation of mass meetings. SWP argued that ‘the same set of principles that reinforces Sarawak nationalism can be taught in different language-medium schools, to inform children from every race that the children and adults of other races are just like their own siblings and parents, who need our care and concern’.<sup>42</sup> *Min Chong Pao* went further to question the choice of selecting English as the common or national language. Instead it argued that ‘those who knew English were in the absolute minority in this country; [those who advocated conversion] also fail to recognise that a common language should be selected from among the three major races [Chinese, Malay, Dayak] of this country...A genuine national system or common language could only be decided by a self-governing and independent people, on the basis of equality and mutual-benefit’. The editorial concluded that ‘nationalisation’ of schools at the present moment was equivalent to a second round of ‘colonisation’.<sup>43</sup>

As the debates on the proposed ‘conversion’ of Chinese schools raged on, another bombshell was dropped on 27 May 1961, when the prime minister of the Federation of Malaya, Tunku Abdul Rahman, announced that he was favourable to plans to form a ‘Greater Malaysia’ consisting of Malaya, Singapore and the British Borneo Territories – Sarawak, Brunei and North Borneo. It was widely known that the Borneo Territories had only been included in ‘Greater Malaysia’ to entice the

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<sup>41</sup> Ooi Keat Gin, *World beyond the rivers : education in Sarawak from Brooke Rule to Colonial Office Administration 1841-1963* (Hull: Department of South-East Asian Studies, University of Hull, 1996), Chapter VI.

<sup>42</sup> *Sin Wen Pao Editorials*, 2.6.1960, pp. 75-6.

<sup>43</sup> *Min Chong Pau Selected Editorials and Features*, 9.3.1961, pp. 61-2. When the state funds were officially withdrawn in April 1962, six out of sixteen Chinese middle schools opted to stay out of the ‘national system’. The six included three of Kuching’s four Chinese middle schools – the mainspring of left-wing student activism remained largely intact.

Tunku into accepting Singapore, with its left-wing politics and overwhelmingly Chinese population.<sup>44</sup> The whole top-down and racially deterministic approach to the creation of Malaysia clashed with the principles of democratic ‘self-determination’ and *minzu* equality that SUPP had championed from its inauguration. Historian Matthew Jones has shown that although the local expatriate officials in Sarawak were up in their arms against the timing and terms of handing Sarawak over to Kuala Lumpur, it was British interests as seen from the imperial metropolis that prevailed eventually. In a briefing to cabinet ministers in October 1961, Duncan Sandys, the Commonwealth Secretary, conceded that:

[The need to include Sarawak, North Borneo and Brunei in Malaysia] presented the British Government with a difficult problem of timing as the Borneo Territories were far from ready for such an association: in the last analysis we must do what we thought right about that and not simply abide by local opinion in Borneo, but it would be important to carry local opinion with us and the Tunku must be made to understand the need to do so... ..<sup>45</sup>

It was with this undeclared understanding that the British and Malayan governments later appointed the Cobbold Commission to ‘ascertain’ local opinion in Sarawak and North Borneo on 23 November 1961. This is not the place to dwell any further into the intricacies of the ‘Malaysia’ controversy. It will suffice to add that charges of Malaysia being a ‘neo-colonialist’ construction had its origins in the manner by which the universally affirmed right of democratic ‘self-determination’ of all peoples were blatantly brushed aside by the British and its local collaborators during the implementation of ‘Malaysia’.

#### **4.5 The Collapse of the Constitutional Struggle**

Confrontation between the left-wing United Front and the colonial government intensified as SLL consolidated its control of SUPP at its Second Delegates’ Congress in June 1960. Forty-one members were elected to the central

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<sup>44</sup> See M.N. Soviee, *From Malayan Union to Singapore Separation, Political Unification in the Malaysia Region, 1945-1965* (Kuala Lumpur: University Malaya Press, 2005), Chapter Six.

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Mathew Jones, “Creating Malaysia: Singapore Security, the Borneo Territories and the Contours of British Policy, 1961-1963” in *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, Vol. 28, No. 2, May 2000. p. 90.

committee, in which a further fifteen were chosen for a Standing Committee to run the day-to-day affairs of the party. Wen Ming Chyuan was elected Propaganda and Education Secretary, while Bong Kee Chok a member of the Standing Committee. SLL's increased presence in SUPP did not go unnoticed. According to a mid-July colonial intelligence review of the SUPP congress, 'no less than nine of the Central Committee are known to be members or candidate members of the clandestine organisation'. Furthermore, of the eleven members of the Standing Committee who would 'normally be available in Kuching, six are known communists', and '(o)ne of these is the suspected leader of the organisation'. 'The Communists have thus achieved a position whereby they can wield considerable influence on SUPP affairs and direction'.<sup>46</sup> On 26 July, the colonial government tabled a White Paper on 'Subversion in Sarawak', which exposed a 'relatively small but active secret Communist organisation which aims ultimately at the revolutionary overthrow of lawfully constituted government and its replacement by a Communist state'. This White Paper described the Communist penetration of Chinese schools and trade unions and suggested that the 'emergence of political parties has introduced new opportunities for this organisation to carry on its organisation'.<sup>47</sup> Yet the colonial government appeared, at this point, to have confused what was really the work of SLL with the 'Borneo Communist Party' (BCP) – the only organisation named in the entire document.<sup>48</sup>

The publication of the White Paper prepared the public for a series of repressive measures the colonial government was now prepared to undertake against suspected Communists in particular, even if it could only be achieved at the cost of alienating the Chinese more generally. The idea that the BCP, rather than SLL, was behind the Communist subversion had emerged before the apprehension of Fu Tze-man in Sibü for possession of Communist documents. But Fu's arrest on 22 August

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<sup>46</sup> The National Archives of Australia (NAA): A1838/280/3032/2/1/Part 1: 'Joint Intelligence Committee (Far East), Review of Current Intelligence as at 14<sup>th</sup> July, 1960'.

<sup>47</sup> 'Sarawak Council Negri Sessional Paper No. 3 of 1960, Subversion in Sarawak', (Kuching: GPO, 1960)

<sup>48</sup> The BCP was founded in Sarikei by Stanley Wong around 1960. Though it was of more recent vintage and was smaller in membership and more loosely organized in structure, it advocated a more militant revolutionary policy. For example, it was already preparing for armed struggle before the Brunei Revolt occurred on 8 December 1962. However, its influence was limited to a very small group in Sarikei. Unable to mobilize the masses as SLL had done, individual BCP members joined SLL later on during the armed struggle.

1960 must have confounded the colonial government over the true identity of this underground movement for one of the documents found in his possession was the 'Manifesto on the Establishment of the Borneo Communist Party'. Fu, a Kuching born Chinese, was in fact a SAYA member who had been despatched to Sibul, under the direction of Ang Cho Teng. He had obtained a copy of the BCP manifesto by chance and was charged for its possession (together with other Communist literature) under the 'Undesired Persons Ordinance'.<sup>49</sup> Stephen Yong's law firm fought a highly publicised court case against the government's use of the Undesirable Persons Ordinance to deport the local-born Fu. The trial went right to the heart of an ongoing debate about whether the Chinese enjoyed the same rights of citizenship by birth in the state of Sarawak as all other peoples. The court upheld its ruling and Fu was deported in late January 1961.<sup>50</sup> A subsequent appeal to the Privy Council in February 1961 was successful, and it prevented further use of the 'Undesirable Persons Ordinance' on suspected Chinese 'communists'. Yet the political damage had been done, as Stephen Yong highlighted: 'This case has made the local born non-native people feel that they [we]re only second-class citizens, their birth-rights meaningless'.<sup>51</sup> Other repressive measures followed. Between October 1961 and December 1962, the government passed no less than seven bills, in which the people's freedom of movement, speech and association were severely restricted.<sup>52</sup>

Despite the colonial state's increasing constriction of democratic liberties, SLL continued to stick to its course of 'struggling' against 'Malaysia' through constitutional means. This was most evident in April 1962, when underground members of the Party Rakyat Brunei (PRB) held a secret meeting with Wen Ming Chyuan to discuss the possibilities of joining forces in an armed revolt. The PRB had been founded in 1956 by Sheikh A. M. Azahari on the model of the left-wing Party Rakyat Malaya. Azahari had plans to revive the ancient Brunei sultanate that covered the three British Borneo Territories in a constitutional monarchy. While PRB and SUPP had official ties, this liaison had been initiated by the underground ('Jalan Bawah') PRB members, Hidup and Jhaffar through SUPP Miri Branch Secretary, Lui

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<sup>49</sup> Interview with Ang Cho Teng, 25.1.2007.

<sup>50</sup> Ong, *Memoirs*, pp. 526-7. Porritt, *Communism in Sarawak*, pp. 62-3.

<sup>51</sup> 'On the deportation of Sarawak Locals', 24.8.1961, in SUPP Historical Materials, *Tuan Jie Bao Special Edition*, p. 12.

<sup>52</sup> See Porritt, *Communism in Sarawak*, Appendix 1.

How Ming. Lui then accompanied Wen to the meeting, which was held on the Canada Hill on the outskirts of Miri. According to Lui, Wen Ming Chyuan tried to dissuade the PRB from the uprising and on failing, expressed his opinion that SLL was not prepared for armed revolt and would not be so for another twenty years. The brief meeting then ended.<sup>53</sup>

Exactly what figured in Wen Ming Chyuan's calculations over the next two months is a matter of much controversy and particular historical significance. Events show that Wen was prepared to stick to the 'united front' strategy, despite the severe curbs on the practice of constitutional democracy. During SUPP's Third Delegates' Congress (1-5 June 1962), even more SLL/SAYA members would penetrate the SUPP Central Committee. At least fourteen SLL/SAYA members were elected to the Central Committee, with a further six selected to the Standing Committee. The imposition of the 'Malaysia' plan, though repulsive to SLL's nationalist agenda, had clearly not given Wen cause to think about subverting it through violence. Yet having known that the PRB was fermenting an 'armed revolt' in late 1962, it is difficult to understand why Wen failed to take any precautionary measures to protect SLL members. The only person to whom Wen confided this information was Bong Kee Chok,<sup>54</sup> while Lui was instructed to keep the secret.<sup>55</sup> From SLL's perspective, Wen had perhaps judged that the people were not ready for armed struggle and hence was prepared for SLL open front leaders to suffer mass arrests as political detainee martyrs. Yet this will not cohere with Wen's subsequent decision to revoke his Sarawak citizenship and accept deportation to China after he was detained on 22 June 1962. Could it be that Wen simply neglected to think in strategic terms?

SLL's deepening penetration of SUPP precipitated further action from the colonial government. Two weeks after the Third Delegates' Conference, on 22 June 1962, Chin Shaw Tung, Yuen Chun Toh (阮春涛), Wen Ming Chyuan, Bong Kee Chok, and the latter two's wives, Wang Fuk Ing and Lui How Ying, were detained under the 'Restricted Residence Order' to various remote settlements. As Wang and Chin were China-born, the 'Undesirable Persons Ordinance' could be evoked to

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<sup>53</sup> Interview with Lui How Ming, 10.1.2007. Lui was the translator in this meeting.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with Bong Kee Chok, 5-6.1.2007.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with Lui How Ming, 10.1.2007.

deport them. When given the option to leave Sarawak, the rest decided to join them in China. According to Bong, it was a strategic plan to ‘Leave by the front door, Return by the back’ (前门出、后门进).<sup>56</sup> This ‘strategy’ was however not disseminated to SLL members. Hence, with the departure of Wen, Bong and Wang, SLL’s Central Committee was immediately depleted by half. Furthermore, Guo Weizhong had been exiled to North Borneo in early 1962 in a ‘rectification campaign’ for his criticisms of SLL’s lack of a more formal and bureaucratic structure. From late June 1962, SLL was left to the charge of the heads of the peasants’ and labour movement, Lin Yong Lun and Lim Ho Kui, both ignorant of the PRB’s plan for violent revolt.<sup>57</sup>

As the crisis deepened in the following month, with the detentions of another four ‘open’ SLL members in SUPP and trade unions, SLL began to look across the border for international assistance. In August and September, Boon Siak Fah (温锡华), a SAYA Peasants’ Association member and secretary of the SUPP Tundong sub-branch made two expeditions to West Kalimantan in the company of a Li Mayao (李玛耀) and another ‘superior from Kuching’. The expeditions accomplished three objectives. First, upwards of twenty ‘*surat penduduk*’ (residential certificates) were obtained from the Partai Nasional Indonesia office and brought home to Sarawak. All travellers who intended to stay in Indonesia required these permits. Second, Boon’s superior established contacts with the Partai Komunis Indonesia office at Pemangkat. Third, the routes that led to West Kalimantan had been reconnoitred. Lim Ho Kui also strengthened *minzu* works in the border regions.<sup>58</sup>

Within three days of the outbreak of the Brunei Revolt on 8 December 1962, Lin Yong Lun was detained along with twenty-five other SLL/SAYA members. According to Lim Ho Kui, moments after learning about Brunei’s uprising, he began to set his pen to paper to pass down the orders for SLL/SAYA to prepare for armed struggle. From Lim’s perspective, the constitutional path had been ‘blocked’, the Brunei Malays had risen and the Indonesians were assisting the anti-Malaysia forces. In January 1963, the first batch of Chinese youths would cross the border into

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<sup>56</sup> Interview with Bong Kee Chok, 5-6.1.2007.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with Lim Ho Kui, 7.3.2007.

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*

Indonesian Kalimantan to train for the day when they would fight back and 'liberate' Sarawak.

## Chapter Five

### Conclusion

This thesis is an historical enquiry into the origins of the socialist revolution in Sarawak. Chapter Two suggests that the defeat of the Europeans in Asia and the merchant class Chinese *kapitans*' failure to put up any form of resistance against the Japanese had de-legitimised the colonial system of indirect rule in the eyes of the left-wing Chinese intelligentsia. These left-wing teachers and journalists, who maintained their clandestine network of resistance during the war, wanted to institute a more democratic system of governance and representation among the Chinese in Sarawak. When they were thwarted in their aims by the return of the British colonial government and the re-establishment of the 'kapitan' system in July 1946, it was education and publishing which their attention would turn. No doubt the Communist victory in China gave a tremendous psychological boost to 'communism' in the political thinking of the Chinese youth in Sarawak, but this thesis argues that the radicalisation of the youth was the result of far deeper local social changes that occurred after the war: the creation of a single Chinese community through unified 'Chung Hwa Schools', the massive expansion of post-war Chinese education and the consequent increase in literacy, and the proliferation of left-wing literature and print media in the region.

A second gap in the historiography this thesis seeks to fill is the lack of knowledge about Sarawak's first clandestine left-wing organisations and their early leaders' aims and strategies. In Chapter Three, I demonstrate that Sarawak-oriented youths had gained control of the revolutionary movement in Kuching from as early as October 1951. A comparison of the two strike actions initiated by SNDYL and SLL in 1951 and 1955 respectively shows that while both organisations were Sarawak-oriented in their revolutionary goals, the latter proved better organised, more strategic in thinking, and hence more successful ultimately. It was through Wen Ming Chyuan's vision, tenacity and strategic handling that the 'revolution', which had lost much steam after the colonial government's 1952 Emergency crackdown, was fully restored by late 1955 as a mass movement among Kuching's Chinese youth. It has seldom been mentioned that the 30 March 1955 students' strike at the Kuching CHMS took place almost simultaneously as the Bandung Conference. At an



ideological and strategic level, the strike would have the same impact on students as the Conference had on emerging Afro-Asian nations: it claimed for them, amidst an increasingly polarised world, the basic and universal principles of independence and freedom for all peoples to decide their own fates. But more importantly, at the tactical level, the 30 March Strike determined the ‘masses line’ SLL/SAYA would follow in their attempt to mobilise the Sarawak peoples against colonialism.

Much has been made about the communalist and Communistic ends of SLL-led revolution. Chapter Four suggests that SLL-led ‘united front’ was first and foremost a democratic mass movement that strove to realise their immediate goal of national liberation for a multi-*minzu* Sarawak. Viewed from the late colonial state’s nation-building imperatives, the Sarawak Chinese’s refusal to ‘assimilate’ does seem at first glance like a case of cultural chauvinism. Granted, the left-wing Chinese saw Chinese culture, most manifestly the private Chinese school system, as an integral part of the national culture they hoped would evolve in the new nation. Yet their opposition to the ‘Ten Year Conversion’ plan (to the English language) was, as I demonstrated in Chapter Four, motivated by their resistance to what they saw as colonial education rather than any wish to dominate other races culturally. The inconclusive debate on Sarawak’s national language or national model of education during the period 1960-1961 was further relegated to the sidelines when plans to form a super federation of ex-British territories in Southeast Asia, in which the Federation of Malaya would be dominant, was promulgated in May 1961.

What or who made the policies of SLL/SAYA during this period? Previous scholars have outlined the contours of SLL/SAYA policies without analysing the influence of personalities on the course of history.<sup>1</sup> This thesis has assembled for the first time the underground personalities behind Sarawak’s clandestine communist movement and the strategies and aims behind their organisation. Did personalities make any decisive difference to the history of Sarawak’s revolution? While the current historiography has taken little account of the role of personalities in shaping the course of the movement, this thesis argues that personalities did make a difference. Three leaders stand out in the early history of SLL: Wen Ming Chyuan, Bong Kee

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<sup>1</sup> Hardy, *Danger Within*; Van der Kroef, ‘Communalism and Communism’; Porritt, *Communism in Sarawak*.

Chok and Lim Ho Kui. Wen's level-headed calculations, Bong's open charisma, and Lim's meticulous underground organisation in the labour movement combined to bring fruition to the 'masses' line' policy during the constitutional struggle (1956-63). At decisive moments, during June (Wen and Bong) and December 1962 (Lim), their assessments and decisions changed the course of the revolutionary struggle of SLL. The role of personalities warrants further research. A more in-depth study of Wen Ming Chyuan's background and his reading of the times, for example, will help to unlock several mysteries surrounding the evolution of the revolutionary movement.<sup>2</sup>

The previous chapter closed with Lim Ho Kui's decision in December 1962 to take the armed struggle route. There has been much debate among ex-comrades, informed by hindsight, about the wisdom and legitimacy of Lim's move.<sup>3</sup> Yet there is no doubt that, conditioned by Communist theories of armed struggle, thousands of SLL/SAYA members rallied to Lim's orders. Furthermore, Wen Ming Chyuan's and Bong Kee Chok's active participation in leading the armed struggle upon their return to the region indicates the top SLL leadership's consensus on the armed struggle route. This thesis suggests that the roots of SLL/SAYA participation in the Indonesian-led 'Confrontation' (1963-66) and its continued armed opposition to the Malaysian state up to 1990 stemmed from a nascent Sarawak nationalist movement that began to take shape within the Chinese community after the Second World War. This movement culminated in the founding of SLL in July 1953 by what was essentially a group of radical Chinese youth. They were no doubt inspired by the global Communist movement, foremost of which was the China model, to conceive of and organise a similar revolution for their newly adopted homeland – Sarawak. In the final analysis, the Communist ideals of egalitarianism, *minzu*-nationalist dreams for independence, and an effectively managed and disciplined organisation that took root during the

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Wen alone holds the key to these mysteries: the departure of Teo Yong Jim after the founding of SLL, Wen's decision to 'expose' himself in 1956 (in the *Sin Wen Pau*) and 1959 (standing for election in the Kuching Municipal Council), Wen's silence and inaction after being informed of the impending Brunei Revolt in April 1962.

<sup>3</sup> Some critics point out that a single member of the Central Committee did not have the legitimacy to authorise such a major initiative. Others claim that it was reckless to launch an armed revolt without the support of the other races; SLL should have hung on to the constitutional struggle. Yet others ponder about the likelihood of a grand conspiracy the British triggered through provoking the Party Rakyat Brunei's revolt, which in turn gave them the pretext to detain socialist forces in the fledgling Malaysia in one fell swoop. There have even been suggestions that Ho Kui had been planted by the Special Branch to take SLL on a misadventure. Anonymous sources.

period 1945-1963 were decisive in sustaining the socialist revolution that held out in Sarawak until its eventual collapse in 1990.

The End

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Chan Boon Ho	田文和	8.1.2007
Fong Moi Kee	洪梅枝	16.1.2007
Goh Thian Ee	吴添义	2.2.2007
Mr. Ho	何君	21.1.2007
Huang Rupi	黄汝疋	7.1.2007
Mr. Khoo	邱君	12.5.2006, 11.1.2007

Lam Wan Shin	蓝万兴	8.1.2007
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