Souchou Yao

The Malayan Emergency. Essays on a Small, Distant War. Copenhagen: NIAS Press [Monograph Series 133], 2016, ix + 178 pp. ISBN 9788776941901, price: USD 68.34 (hardcover); 9788776941918, USD 24.88 (paperback).

Malaysian-born anthropologist Souchou Yao debunks the popular myth of British generosity and competency in the way the post-war Empire handled Malaya's decolonization through the re-examination of the Malayan Emergency (1948–60) in his latest book here under review. Bringing in multiple perspectives to the conflict, including those of his own family and those of ex-insurgents, Yao fills the missing gaps of the larger, and certainly more complex, picture of the human hopes and struggles experienced in that 'small, distant war' at the edge of the British Empire. Organized in nine chapters, or 'essays', the book explores the Emergency from different angles that reflect on the desires, dilemmas, and disillusionment that beset the Communist cause and its supporters on the one hand, while expounding on the repressive and violent counter-insurgency measures of the British on the other.

The book opens with the chapter, 'On Empire', which argues that the post-war, debt-ridden and crumbling British Empire took up arms not just to protect its imperial assets and interests but also to defend its 'prestige and influence' (p. 11) in a bid to maintain the fantasy of imperial pride and power. Chapter 2 shifts to the present and gives voice to the other side via interviews with ex-insurgents, interspersed with the analysis of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) and its objectives of 'progressive liberalism and socialism' (p. 31). Chapter 3 elaborates on the repressive and violent measures of the British, whose approach to counter-insurgency reveals a 'deep understanding of mass psychology and the subtle interplay of benevolence and brutality, reward and punishment' (p. 59), while Chapter 4 discusses why the peasants, the majority of whom were Chinese, turned to the revolutionary path. The following fifth and sixth chapters analyze at length the British approaches, strategies, rhetoric, and propaganda through the slogan, 'Hearts and Minds'—incidentally the title of both chapters, as well as the effects of their anti-insurgent campaigns. Chapter 7 considers the reasons behind the long-held view of the MCP as a Chinese-dominated affair and why it failed to build a 'truly multi-ethnic communist movement' (p. 132) due to deep racial cleavages that still define Malaysia today. Chapter 8 departs from the other chapters as it uses literature to bring in a different perspective to the Malayan Emergency, namely two war memoirs about the British experiences with communist guerrillas in the Malayan jungle during the Japanese occupation. The concluding chapter reflects on the Emergency through 'historical hindsight' (p. 161) and how the past still affects the present.

in light of the current repressive laws and practices in Malaysia, many of which 'had their origins in the Emergency Ordinances' (p. 164).

Like Yao, I grew up hearing tales of the Malayan Emergency and had to study it at school. My father had worked closely with the government as a translator at the 'New Villages' and had much admiration for the British, especially the brilliant leadership and tactics of Field Marshal Sir Gerald Templer; his opinions echoed the prevailing sentiments of the time, and indeed, our history books have only carried this one-sided 'truth' about the Emergency. In this sense, *The Malayan Emergency* fits very well within the postcolonial framework of 'writing back', revealing different facets of the Emergency that we hardly hear or know about, since the ex-insurgents have always been cast in the role of 'villain' or 'vanquished', silenced, and exiled. Yao's multi-angled approach not only provides a much-needed fresh take on the conflict, but it also makes emphatic that no one was left untouched by the Malayan Emergency, the ramifications of which are still felt in Malaysia today.

I especially like Yao's candid and straightforward writing style as he skillfully weaves a colorful tapestry made up of insightful analyses, affective experiences, and descriptive vignettes. Equally notable is his deft hand at evoking pathos with his poignant and, at times, poetic retelling of failed dreams and disillusionment. The emotional dimensions of the book, coupled with Yao's multidisciplinary approach to his study—which broadly includes anthropological, psychoanalytical, historical, philosophical, postcolonial, literary, and cultural analyses and perspectives, made *The Malayan Emergency* an enjoyable and 'easy' read despite its heavy subject-matter. As a result, the book would appeal not only to the academic audience but also the non-academic reader curious about this topic. My only concern is the lack of primary sources in his study. More referencing could have been included, too, if only to enrich the reader's understanding of the kind of materials and sources available on the subject.

All in all, Yao succeeds in his aim of bringing in a new perspective to the Emergency, and his approach is certainly quite creative. I highly recommend it to those wishing to know more about Malaysia's decolonization years, the communist insurgency in this part of the world, and the inner workings of the Empire in how it tackled the revolution.

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