

Recalling Malaya's Communist Menace:

Fact and Fiction on Chin Peng

Review >
Southeast Asia

Whether today's spectre of Islamic terrorism in Southeast Asia should be compared with fears of communist menace in the region from the end of World War II until the 1970s could lead to endless debate. The times and politics would seem very different, and the world views of Islamic extremists and 'godless' communists are at different ends of the spectrum. Yet if there is one lesson for today's assessment of Islamic militancy, it would be the danger of stereotypes and simplistic explanations, judging by *My Side of History*, the memoirs of Chin Peng, leader of communist guerrillas who fought British and Commonwealth forces in Malaya in the late 1940s and 1950s.

By Andrew Symon

Chin Peng co-authored his story with Singapore-based writers and publishers Ian Ward, who was formerly the Southeast Asia correspondent for the London newspaper, the *Daily Telegraph*, and Ward's wife Norma Mirafior. One of the last of the region's old revolutionary leaders, Chin Peng still lives in southern Thailand, now aged 79.

Back in the 1940s and 1950s, Chin Peng, secretary of the Communist Party of Malaya, and his followers, mostly ethnic Chinese, were painted as bloodthirsty communist terrorists, alien revolutionaries directed by the Soviet Union and China who were unrepresentative of the local communities.

Chin Peng being received by China's Mao Zedong in March 1965.



Courtesy Ian Ward

In Pursuit of Chin Peng

Author Ian Ward's quest for Chin Peng's story began more than three decades ago. It first led not to the general secretary of the Communist Party of Malaya, but to the writer's capture at gunpoint by guerrillas in north-west Malaysia. In 1972, the Singapore-based Southeast Asia correspondent for the London *Daily Telegraph*, Ward had set out driving in the Sungai Siput area north of the town of Ipoh hoping to be able to find a way to Chin Peng, who was assumed to be somewhere in the jungle across the border in Thailand, while he was in fact in Beijing. A small band of guerrillas pulled Ward over, took him to a cemetery, took his money and car, and left him there bound with wire.

It was another 30 years before the pursuit met with success. Ward and his wife Norma Mirafior managed to meet Chin Peng as a result of help from the late professor Michael Leifer of the London School of Economics. Through Leifer, they were able to contact a relative of Chin Peng living outside of the region, who was able to arrange a meeting with him in southern Thailand in late 2000. After several more visits, trust was established. Then followed more than 30 meetings in southern Thailand, during which his story was tape-recorded, and earlier transcriptions corrected. Ward and Mirafior also made visits to archives in the United Kingdom and Australia, where official papers of the time were copied and collected to provide documented support for Chin Peng's history along with those from his own archives.

Ward, a one-time war correspondent, covering stories from Vietnam to Bangladesh, says that while he has always been deeply suspicious of official lines and propaganda, the project opened his mind to the communist position half a century ago. 'I now believe that if I had been a working class Chinese in the 1930s, I would certainly have been at least sympathetic to the Communist Party of Malaya. I can understand what motivated them. The world doesn't yet appreciate how appalling colonialism could be.' Ward says that, today, the communists should be more correctly seen as nationalists rather than simply Chinese extremists as painted by the British. According to Ward, Chin Peng was a communist ideologue in those days: 'But he was not personally a brutal man. He could be a tough leader, but not a cruel leader, not vicious.'

The reception of the book by British and Australian military veterans is mixed. Some are calling on the book to be boycotted, saying that no money should go to Chin Peng through the book's sales. Ward says all funds entitled to Chin Peng are going at his request to a foundation for care of some 200 aged and disabled former guerrillas now living in four villages in southern Thailand. Other veterans have welcomed the book as shedding new light on the events of the times. <

In the early 1950s, at the height of what was called the 'Emergency', which ran from 1948-1960, there were a hundred thousand soldiers and police hunting several thousand communist fighters in the Malayan jungles and a reward of Malaysian dollars 250,000 for Chin Peng's capture. The London *Daily Mail* described Chin Peng in 1955 as a man 'notorious for his ruthlessness and calculated ferocity' (quoted from: Chin Peng 2003:368). He had spread 'death, destruction, and misery in a vain attempt to gain political power by force of arms'. Yet Chin Peng, or Ong Boon Hua, argues that the British stereotyped them in this way to justify the British presence in Malaya. Ultimately though, their threat, he argues, finally forced the British to grant independence to Malaya in 1957, as the price for Malay and moderate local Chinese support against the communists, and against guarantees that British strategic and commercial interests would continue to be protected. 'The declassified documents of the Emergency years prove how the British manipulated language and information lest the rest of the world got to believe the Communist Party of Malaysia was a legitimate nationalist group seeking the end of colonialism' (p.515).

In 1954, the commissioner general of the United Kingdom in Southeast Asia, Malcolm McDonald, advised the foreign office in London that 'no one can be allowed to depict the Malayan war as a spontaneous nationalist uprising.' (p.357) Rather, Britain should 'affirm that the Malayan insurgents are primarily an alien force acting under alien instructions.' In fact, Chin Peng says there was no assistance or orders from Beijing or Moscow at the height of the fighting in the 1940s and 1950s. However, after 1961, there was Chinese policy direction and financial support for the remnants of the guerrilla groups, whose numbers and vigour were briefly renewed with the success of the communists in Indo-China in the early and mid-1970s. A thousand or so continued to fight sporadically from southern Thailand until a peace accord was finally reached in 1989, brokered by the Malaysian and Thai prime ministers, Mahathir Mohammad and Chavalit Youngchaiydh.

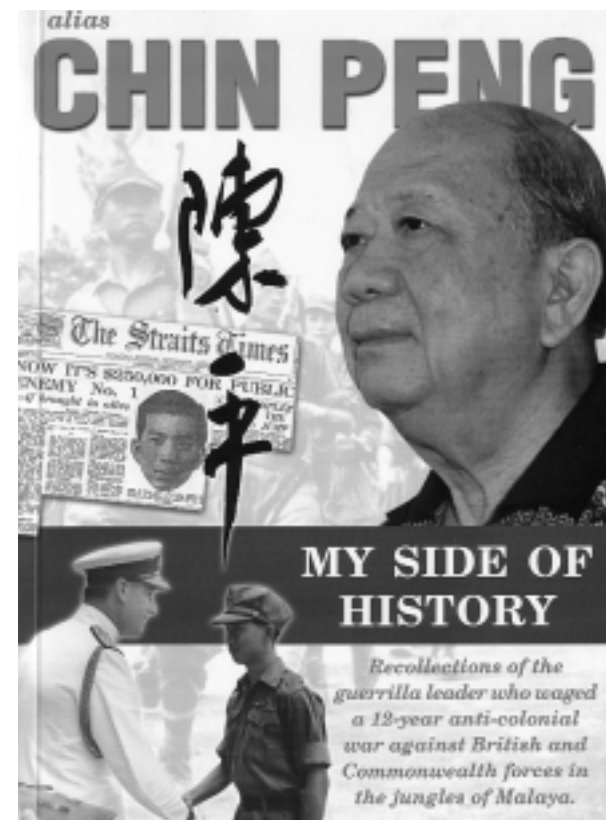
A sense of emergency

Chin Peng says in his memoirs that his concern was always for Malaya. He was attracted to communism through the writings of Mao Zedong in response to what he saw as exploitative, often heavy-handed British rule. To illustrate this, he points to the fact that workers, originally brought from the subcontinent to work on rubber plantations, were deported back to India in the 1930s when the Depression made their labour no longer profitable for planters. Communist Party members also faced banishment from Malaya. For Malayan Chinese sent to China before Mao came to power in 1949, this meant, Chin Peng says, death or prison by the Kuomintang nationalist government. By the early 1960s, there were 20,000 banished Malayan Chinese communists and their families in China.

His recollection of an arrogant and racist colonial regime clashes with the common picture, at least in the West, of the British in Malaya as essentially decent and generally beneficial, if somewhat eccentric rulers, inclined to play sport out in the noonday sun.

Foreshadowing his later resistance to British colonialism, as a teenager Chin Peng decided to fight against the Japanese from the jungles along with other communists, in alliance with the British. As a result, one British officer characterized him as courageous, reliable, and likeable. In 1946, Lord Louis Mountbatten awarded him campaign medals in recognition of his contribution and in 1947 he would have been awarded an Order of the British Empire if it were not for the fact that the Malayan Communist Party decided to pursue armed revolution.

During this armed revolution, claims Chin Peng, neither the party central committee nor the politburo ever adopted a programme that targeted civilians. Surly, there were unauthorized excesses committed by communist guerrillas, but not to the extent reported by the authorities. However, he does argue the British planters were legitimate targets, with



Courtesy of Media Masters

their histories of exploiting workers and hiring thugs to break up strikes on their plantations. 'In post-war Malaya they were armed; they surrounded themselves with paid thugs; they drove in armoured cars.'

The British themselves, he writes, were guilty of using 'terror' tactics to retain their hold on Malaya. 'To contain the Emergency, the British burned villages, cut rations, and shot civilians' so as to break lines of support to the guerrilla camps in the jungle (p.511). A peace could have been achieved as early as 1955, he says, if the British and then leaders of Malaya, Tunku Abdul Rahman and Singapore's David Marshall, had not demanded that the communist fighters capitulate and surrender but, rather, had allowed them to hand over or destroy their weapons in an agreed way and then resume normal life with normal political freedoms: which was broadly the outcome of the 1989 accords. However, in the 1950s, there was a dominant fear that this would result in the re-emergence of a radical and destabilizing leftist organization, given that the guerrillas were still young or just about middle-aged men and women. A decade and a half later Chin Peng was still portrayed as a threat. Writing in *The War of the Running Dogs*, published in 1971, Noel Barber said, 'Chin Peng still lurks north of the border, taking refuge not only in neutrality but in the thought that if Mao Zedong had to wait thirty years in the "Chinese Jungle" before achieving victory, he can do the same...'

Today, Chin Peng wants to spend the last years of his life in Malaysia; a request that has so far been refused by the Malaysian government. He is now a stateless alien granted residency by the Thai government. The strong sales of the book in Malaysia and Singapore – 17,000 in the two months after its launch in September – and direct feedback to Ward shows there still remains a great deal of respect and admiration for Chin Peng and his convictions, despite the way he and his followers had been portrayed in earlier days. Chin Peng now describes himself as a socialist who eschews violence. Times have changed. But, he says, in his youth, he had 'to be a liberation fighter...If you had lived in a Malayan rural population centre...and observed how dismissive the British colonials were of our lot in the 1930s, you would find it easier to understand how the attraction of a Communist Party of Malaysia could take hold' (p.510). Which suggests that careful study of the reasons for the today's attraction of extremist Islam in the region – and how this might be reduced – is as vital as police measures to prevent terrorist acts. <

- Peng, Chin, *My Side of History* (as told to Ian Ward and Norma Mirafior), Singapore: Media Masters (2003), pp.527, incl. photographs, ISBN 981-04-8693-6

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