“A Paris cable dispatch mentioned Europe’s fear of Russia. Russia’s red army, her rapidly expanding fleet and her reborn navy are looked upon with growing concern in all the capitals of Europe. Europe is uneasy. The world is uneasy. But rather then these elements, civilization should fear Russia’s invisible army, that octopus which silently stretches forth its tentacles in an effort to dominate the world by dominating first the masses. The Philippines does not seem to be entirely free from the clutches of this octopus. The constabulary have their eyes on supposed agents of the Moscow government who are here to disseminate Communistic principles and who are said to be receiving Soviet gold. Russia’s menace does not lie in her army and navy. Her forces can be destroyed in battle. What is difficult to combat is her invisible army, her paid agents who are instructed to win the masses to the cause of Soviet Russia.” [1]

In principle, this Times editorial was an accurate snapshot of the Comintern operation in Southeast Asia. The “defence of the Soviet Union”, as it was called, was an indispensable theme in the propaganda the Comintern required member parties to generate, such that to the police of the foreign concessions in Shanghai or the British Straits Settlement of Singapore, this campaign appeared to resemble an octopus. By virtue of their job, the police could sense the emergence of a massive movement by following the immense paper trail of the reports small Communist parties were sending to the Comintern. This created the image of the making of an active revolution, one which would require Comintern money, cadres, and directives. Directives were in abundance at the Comintern, but agents and gold were short—so those had to be figured out in the field.

The Communist “Octopus”

Southeast Asia has been the historical region of Chinese migration: the “Nanyang”, the South Seas, spanned from Vietnam and the Philippines down to Indonesia and across the Malay Peninsula to Siam. In these locations, their adopted homes, Chinese Communists founded Communist cells and brought their compatriots for employment. At the time, the loosely organized Philippine Communist Party, consisting of both a Chinese and a Filipino organization, was a node in the networks of the Communist “octopus” boosted by Comintern connections. From 1927 to 1928, after the defeat of the revolution in Europe and of the Communist-led “Chinese revolution” at the hands of the Chinese Nationalist Party, the Guomindang, the Comintern intensified its work in the colonial countries. In 1930, the Comintern supported the establishment of “national” Communist parties in British Malaya, French Indochina, the American Philippines, and Siam, now known as Thailand, which was the only sovereign state in the region. All were tiny parties comprising Communist activists, some of whom studied in Moscow. Sojourning indigenous Chinese nationalists and Communists played an active role in Malayan, Siamese, and Philippine parties: in their new homes, the multi-ethnic societies of Southeast Asia—as the ones in the United States, Canada, and Cuba—struggled for the rights of immigrants and against immigration restrictions. The Comintern promoted the message of national independence from the colonial masters and of an internationalist alliance of parties of different countries as well as of different ethnic groups within national parties.

However, some consequences of the Comintern’s activities were unintended. The Malayan Communist Party (MCP) is a window into how the Comintern worked in Southeast Asia and in the international circuits of Chinese migrants. It was despite the Bolshevik-inspired radicalism of the 1930s, not because of it, that the party survived. As in Europe, [2] the Communist Party in British Malaya gained power during the World War II resistance wars. The role of the Comintern was ironic: It provided the foundations for a nationalist revolution but failed to bring the Communist Party to power.
In Malaya, the principle of a nationwide multi-ethnic Communist Party consisting of ethnic parties became the political organization of an independent Malaya after 1957, although it would be led by an anti-Communist organization. This principle was proposed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and borrowed from party organization methods used in the United States.

From Ho Chi Minh to Earl Browder

Indeed, the world of international Communism during the 1920s and the 1930s was global. Europeans and Asians shaped the Comintern’s approach in those regions. Notable was Indonesian Comintern representative Tan Malaka, a proponent of a Pan-Asian Communist network. Dutch Henk Sneevliet defined his own mission as to connect the Chinese movement with the international network. He also established one of the earliest Communist parties in Asia, the Partai Komunis Indonesia (1920). The Comintern sent Sneevliet to Shanghai in 1921 to establish an office there, and Sneevliet proposed connecting the movements in the Philippines, Indochina, and the Dutch Indies with that in British India because of their similarities. [3]

The Eastern Department of the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI) was responsible for deciding the “guiding line” in the Malay Archipelago. This line was based on Sneevliet’s proposal to Tan Malaka, who had the task of building connections between the anti-imperialist movement in Indonesia and “all countries of the East”, especially with China, and to build organizations in the Malay Archipelago, Indochina, Siam, and Singapore. [4] In this vision, Singapore was to be the platform on which the Communist movements of China and Indonesia could be brought together, including the movements of the overseas Chinese.

In 1923, with the rise of radicalism in Java, the most populous Indonesian island of the Dutch Indies, Moscow started to strategize with regard to the Dutch East Indies. For the Comintern, the Malay Archipelago was an important strategic position between the Pacific and Indian Oceans, “near the most populated countries of the globe—China and India”. [5]

After the suppression of the Communist uprising in Indonesia from 1926 to 1927, Indonesian Communists fled to Singapore and became the first Communists in British Malaya. At the same time, the Nanyang branch of the Chinese Communist Party in Singapore and Malaya was formed (1926). The Chinese Communists who had escaped suppression by the Guomindang in China joined this organization in Southeast Asia in 1927, continuing the centuries-long Chinese tradition of seeking refuge from disasters in the Nanyang.

Communist refugees from both China and from the Dutch East Indies escaped police persecution in Singapore and Malaya. Although they did not join forces, the CCP branch in Singapore aimed to recruit non-Chinese. By 1928, the de facto CCP leader was Li Lisan, who had experience working in France among Chinese labourers. He criticized the Chinese immigrant Communists in the Nanyang for “making a Chinese revolution”, that is, for focusing on resisting Japanese aggression in China. Like the rest of the Chinese community, Communists encouraged a boycott of Japanese goods among other anti-Japanese activities. Chinese Communists also campaigned for democratic freedoms and better working conditions and protested the control of Chinese education in British Malaya. Li Lisan promoted the establishment of an independent Communist organization in Southeast Asia and advocated for a Nanyang revolution. This revolution was meant to involve decolonization from the British and Dutch governments and an alliance of Nanyang nationalities in a Nanyang republic. Adapting the Communist strategy to local conditions would help achieve this, since CCP labour and anti-imperialist policies developed in China did not work in Southeast Asia. However, Li Lisan also proposed that the Nanyang revolution depended on the success of the revolution in China. Moreover, he tasked the Chinese with the emancipation of the Nanyang, as he argued that Chinese and locals could not achieve colonial liberation separately.

In the meantime, the Comintern intensified its operations in the colonies. The Malayan national Communist Party was established under the guidance of two Comintern agents: Chinese Fu Daqing and Vietnamese Ho Chi Minh. The Comintern internationalist message of involving non-Chinese in the Malayan party promoted the Comintern principle of one recognized multi-ethnic party per country: In this
way, the Comintern shared the CCP’s goal of recruiting non-Chinese members. The Comintern delegated to the MCP the revival of the suppressed Communist Party in Indonesia. Thus, Nanyang Communists there were ready to appropriate this Comintern model of a “national” party based on the principle of internationalism, that is, involving non-Chinese in the party. Besides, the Comintern offered international recognition and funding—the party otherwise would have had to continue borrowing from the masses.

**Pushing for a Multi-Ethnic Party**

The Comintern promoted Bolshevik mass parties, but individual party structures depended on local communal organizations. International Communist networks intersected with Chinese networks, and similar to the migrant structure of the Communist movement and of society at large in the United States and British Malaya, the American Communist movement influenced the MCP’s vision of a multi-ethnic party organization via the head of the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat (est. 1927 in Hankou), American Earl Browder, whose organizational ideas originated in the American multi-ethnic context. The strategy of framing the MCP as the foundation of the trade union movement in the Nanyang relied on first organizing labour unions among separate ethnic groups and then uniting these into one trade union.

Not only the policies of international Communist movements travelled from one part of the world to another via Comintern channels, however. The Comintern likewise promoted the same policy of indigenization in Malaya as in the United States, where Americanization was simply a response to pressures by American Communists, as immigrant sections in the American Communist Party were the largest. [6] In Chinese Communist networks, enhanced by Comintern connections, policies were localized and then applied elsewhere as well.

Nonetheless, the Comintern refused to recognize the Malayan Communist Party, which was structured along ethnic lines, and pushed for one national multi-ethnic party in which members of all Malayan ethnic groups would participate together. The MCP complied. The promise of funds and international recognition was enough to make the MCP conform to the Comintern’s directive to form a national Communist Party, not a committee consisting of ethnic parties. Yet the MCP remained organized by ethnicity in a sense, not least because the MCP was unable to recruit non-Chinese to the party because of a lack of language skills. As for the Comintern’s recognition, it was stalled because of the Comintern’s subsidy which the MCP received even though it was not recognized by the Comintern.

**The MCP: Both a Chinese Regional Lodge and a Bolshevik Party**

The Comintern pushed for the MCP to become one united national party. In this way, the MCP became the only Chinese organization in Malaya to nominally represent a Malayan multiethnic nation. In contrast, the British government’s national idea for Malaya excluded Chinese immigrants. The organizational structure of the MCP was reminiscent of both a Chinese regional lodge, *huiguan*, and a Bolshevik party. Especially in the early years, the majority of MCP members came from Hainan Island. Apart from fostering a revolution, the party aimed to promote equal rights for Chinese in British Malaya, adopting the same functions Chinese associations had undertaken for decades. In this organization, aiming to protect Chinese interests and to bring in non-Chinese, the nationalist and internationalist messages of the Comintern came together.

Meanwhile, the Far Eastern Bureau of the Comintern in Shanghai (FEB) had too much on its plate steering the revolution in East Asia, so the CCP acted as an intermediary between the MCP and the Comintern. Chinese Communists in the Nanyang continued to draw the Comintern’s attention to their region. Malayan Communist Wang Yung Hai said in his letter to the Comintern, “It is my hope ... that our reports will be sent to Moscow in order to attract the special attention of the Comintern to the work of the Nanyang.” Frustrated that the Comintern paid little attention, Wang Yung Hai sent criticism of the Comintern to the CCP. Echoing earlier criticisms the CCP had voiced, Wang wrote that the Comintern gave instructions that were good on paper but hardly effective in action, writing, “[The most urgent need is to have] a strong and regular connection with the Far Eastern Bureau of the Comintern [in Shanghai], which should understand the conditions in Malaya in order to guide more closely the work in the Nanyang. If there is no whole, concrete, practical instruction, as well as material assistance, the party of
Malaya can never get from the present condition of half-living, half-dying.” [7]

In the 1930s, the MCP reached a peak membership of 1,500 and blamed its failure to recruit successfully on its own policy of “closed doors” and its incomprehensible literary propaganda. Ho Chi Minh complained to the Comintern in the same time period of a lack of due attention from the Comintern to the matters of the Indochinese party. According to a British analysis of documents seized from the Comintern’s Far Eastern Bureau regarding Indochina, the most frequent themes in these letters to the Comintern were requests for recognition, directives, and financial assistance. [8]

The demise of the Comintern’s Far Eastern Bureau in Shanghai following the arrest of Comintern agent Joseph Ducroux in 1931 exposed Communist networks in Southeast Asia. [9]

The MCP’s connection with the Comintern was briefly re-established from 1933 to 1934 and then lost again until the CCP sent MCP reports to the Comintern on the eve of World War II. In the 1930s, the Comintern’s goal remained to revive the Communist Party in Indonesia by pushing the unwilling Chinese Communists to transform their networks into a Southeast Asian network. Communication was intermittent due to police surveillance, and contact was lost because the police intercepted the MCP’s confirmation of a receipt of a Comintern subsidy. The consequence of this was that the Comintern gave up and decided not to recognize the MCP as a Comintern section. During those years, the infamous secretary of the MCP, the Sino-Vietnamese Lai Teck, who spied for the French and British police, as well as later for the Japanese occupational authorities, was able to rise to power in the MCP by faking Comintern credentials.

Before its demise in 1931, the FEB allocated 50,000 gold dollars to Malaya, but the only subsidy the MCP received was a six-month allowance of 1,500 dollars in total in 1934. This was not much, since the party owed members of the community and, among other expenses, had to pay salaries to labour organizers. The main source of revenue for the MCP labour unions was membership fees, but these were not enough so the party borrowed. The son of a gold and silver merchant, Un Hong Siu, helped the MCP with translations of propaganda from the United States and the Comintern, gave the MCP money occasionally, and even considered funding the reorganization of labour unions. [10]

As the MCP fundraised among community members, it promoted an anti-bourgeoisie and anti-British message. As a result, it alienated its following and started to lose the constituency it had attracted during successful strikes from 1936 to 1937 and during its campaign to aid China’s war against Japan. The party bitterly admitted that it lacked influence even among Chinese immigrants, and the number of Malays and Indians in the party was negligible. Anti-British and anti-bourgeoisie slogans alienated the masses, and a MCP report stated, “This is a grave warning that if the party doesn’t abandon its class narrowmindedness, the danger of breaking from the masses is looming.” [11] Open displays of anti-British sentiment caused police reprisals, and in 1940 alone over 200 Communist activists were arrested. In addition, virtually every Chinese came to Nanyang with the dream of becoming rich, so there was little interest in anti-bourgeois propaganda or anti-government activity. Subsequently, the MCP decided to stop its anti-British policy but continued to put forward the slogan of independence.

With rising Japanese aggression in China in 1937, the Chinese overseas launched a massive fundraising effort for China’s resistance war against Japan. The MCP actively participated in this campaign and gained a following before its anti-British message backfired. When the Japanese invaded Malaya, the Japanese atrocities against the Chinese population brought many young Chinese into the MCP, which, along with the Chinese Nationalist Party, the Guomindang, and the British government, led the resistance against Japan. The experience of the Japanese occupation made the MCP even more aware of their Malayan identity.

The Cause of the Soviet Union and Historical Contingencies

What was the appeal of the Comintern to Chinese Communists in Malaya, apart from international legitimation and the promise of funding? Soviet international propaganda showing the prosperity brought about by Stalin’s total labour mobilization projected the image of an economy immune to the Great Depression, in contrast to the rest of the world. Propaganda in support of the Soviet Union, while required
by the Comintern, also made sense in the world of unemployment of the early 1930s—although the MCP reported that explaining this logic to workers was a challenge.

It was local Communists, CCP leaders, as well as Soviet, European, and American Communists who shaped the Comintern line in Southeast Asia. The CCP was a source of key ideas, such as the need to adapt the revolution to local conditions. This message was also promoted by the Comintern. The adaptation of policies to local situations was a cornerstone in the interwar global moment, and this strategy ran parallel to the internationalization of organizations and ideologies: similar to the Comintern, Protestant missions and new Buddhist organizations indigenized in the interwar time. [12]

Moreover, the founder of the Chinese Guomindang, Sun Yatsen, promoted an alliance with the Soviet Union and other oppressed nations for the purpose of China's revival. In 1923, Sun Yatsen was looking for allies and turned to the Soviet government, which also needed international allies at the time. Sun signed an agreement with the Soviet Union paving the way for Soviet influence in China.

Chinese Communists were active in another global anti-colonial organization, the League Against Imperialism (est. 1927). Following the Comintern line, they established regional organizations of the League Against Imperialism in Southeast Asia and the Americas and converted them into Chinese Communist Party front organizations. With the growing Japanese aggression in China in the 1930s, those leagues became both anti-colonial and anti-Japanese organizations.

Comintern anti-colonial nationalism matched the different needs of local sites. The concept of anti-imperialist leagues echoed the internationalist ideas of Sun Yatsen, whose idea of an alliance with the oppressed fit into the Comintern's worldwide internationalist support of the Chinese revolution, which would bring about China's revival. Through these organizations, Chinese Communists channelled ideas to blend in with local populations and protect themselves from discrimination. They represented the Soviet Union as the only ally of oppressed nations. An article in an American Chinese Communist newspaper, *The Chinese Vanguard*, entitled “Lenin and Chinese Overseas” explained that Leninist anti-imperialism could help the Chinese solve their two biggest problems: how to defeat Japan and where to get food. [13] The Comintern was presented simultaneously as the defender of exploited Chinese workers, discriminated-against Chinese émigrés, and the national rights of China. Sun Yatsen’s notion of a beneficial Chinese alliance with oppressed nations thus took on a new layer of Comintern internationalism through the Comintern’s promotion of international support for the Chinese revolution and an alliance with local anti-colonial revolutionaries. According to this Communist vision, a world revolution and the national liberation of the colonies would benefit China’s national interests. [14]

The MCP barely survived in the 1930s. Activities inspired by the Comintern and the CCP were too radical and counterproductive to party goals, but they shaped local ideas and anti-colonial organizations. Moreover, the Communist parties in Southeast Asia fought for decolonization after World War II when the region was liberated from the Japanese occupation, and continued to play a role in national politics during the second half of the twentieth century.

As for Malaya, after the war an anti-Communist organization, the Malayan Chinese Association, which aimed to demonstrate that Chinese in Malaya were not associated with Communists, adopted the same organizational structure of united ethnic parties as the political system for Malaya on the road to independence. While the MCP structure was inspired by Chinese and American Communist parties as well as by Comintern ideas about decolonization and internationalism, the ideas of the Malayan Communist Party and the Malayan Chinese Association were organic for a multi-ethnic society and ran along parallel tracks. Contrary to the common view, this supports the argument that the MCP built its Malayan national idea from the early days of its activities in the colony. [15] As the Malayan Chinese Association headed the independence process, the MCP engaged in the conflict with the British government during the Malayan Emergency (1948–1960) and did not sign a peace accord until 1989.
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**P.S.**

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**Footnotes**


