

“Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” – I: About the book

Sunday 21 October 2007, by [KHOO Agnes](#), [WONG James](#) (Date first published: 30 September 2007).

Presentation of Agnes Khoo's *“Life As the River Flows” - Women's Oral History on the Malayan struggle for Independence* (Published by Merlin Press, United Kingdom, 2007).

See also:

[Part II: “Life As the River Flows - Women's Oral History on the Malayan struggle for Independence” – II: An Introduction](#)

[Part III \(Chapter 1\) : “Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” – III: Cui Hong](#)

[Part IV \(Chapter 2\): “Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” – IV: Chu Ling](#)

[Part V \(Chapter 3\): “Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” – V: Lin Mei \(Born in 1937, Singapore\)](#)

[Part VI \(Chapter 4\): “Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” – VI: Lin Dong \(Born in 1944 in the tropical rainforest of the State of Selangor, Malaya\)](#)

[Part VII \(Chapter 5\): “Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” – VII: Suria \(Born in 1951, Thailand\)](#)

[Part VIII \(Chapter 6\): “Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” – VIII : Guan Shui Lian \(Born in 1946, Perak, Malaysia\)](#)

[Part IX \(Chapter 7\): “Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” – IX: Xiu Ning \(Born in 1927, Malaysia\)](#)

[Part X \(Chapter 8\): “Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” – X: Siti Meriyam Binti Idris \(Siti Meriyam daughter of Idris\) alias ATOM \(Born in 1927, Malaysia\)](#)

[Part XI \(Chapter 9\): “Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” – XI: Huang Xue Ying \(Born in 1934, Perlis, Malaysia\)](#)

[Part XII \(Chapter 10\): “Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” – XII: Qiang Lin \(Born in 1955, Ipoh, Malaysia\)](#)

This web-based and condensed version of the book, "Life as the River Flows" focuses mainly on the struggle for independence from British and Japanese colonialism between 1948 to 1989 in Malaysia and Singapore. The stories have been told from the unique perspective of a group of women ex-guerrillas of the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM), who live in four different 'Peace Villages' in Southern Thailand today. Many of them cannot return to their homeland because of their involvement with the Communist Party of Malaya. The CPM has not only been outlawed by the British and the Japanese colonial governments but also by the post-independent governments of Malaysia and Singapore even until today.

Even though the post-independence governments of Malaysia and Singapore were supposed to be elected through 'democratic' elections, many still believe that the main reason they came to power was because they were handpicked and approved by the British colonial government. This is to ensure that the newly independent states of Malaysia and Singapore will continue to collaborate with their ex-colonial master and safeguard the economic and political interests of the West. This includes the interests of the United States of America after WWII, as the US becomes increasingly dominant in Southeast Asia politically and economically.

The approach for this series of write-ups will assume that most readers have little intimate knowledge about the history, geography, demography and the socio-cultural atmosphere of Malaysia (which consists of East Malaysia i.e. Sabah and Sarawak and West Malaysia) and Singapore, beyond the fact that both are popular holiday and tourist destinations for European holidaymakers.

The United Kingdom Edition of "Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle, as told to Agnes Khoo", has been published in February 2007 by Merlin Press, Wales, UK. This edition is available at www.merlinpress.co.uk or www.ipgbook.com and selected bookstores in the United Kingdom.

Its Malaysian Edition entitled "Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan Anti-Colonial Struggle (An Oral History of Women from Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore), as told to Agnes Khoo" was published by SIRD, Malaysia in 2004. This Malaysian Edition is also available in Chinese language (simplified script), published in the same year and was nominated by the *Asia Times Magazine* (Chinese version) as one of the top-ten Best Sellers in September 2004. Both the Chinese and English versions of the Malaysian Edition are available through www.gerakbudaya.com or www.kinibooks.com and any other major bookstores in Malaysia. The Chinese edition will be having a reprint soon. In Singapore, the English version of the book is only available through www.selectbooks.com.sg and the Chinese version, in certain selected bookstores.

Chu Liu Pte Ltd. has published a Taiwanese Edition (in Chinese traditional script) with additional chapters written by Taiwanese women activists in June 2006. This book is available at <http://www.liwen.com.tw> or through chuliu_ms13.hinet.net

A Malay language Edition of the book shall be published by Gerakbudaya Enterprise in Malaysia this year. And an Indonesian edition is also underway.

This book was also introduced in a recent film directed by Malaysian film-maker, Amir Mohammed entitled: "The Last Communist", which looks at this period of Malaysian and Singaporean history in a light-hearted manner. The film is however, banned by the Malaysian government even though it has already been screened at many international film festivals around the world. Such as Singapore,

New Delhi in India, New York, Hong Kong, Taiwan. And in South Korea, by the Education Broadcasting Service (EBS) in August 2006. Some of the villagers interviewed in the film were interviewees of the book: "Life as the River Flows".

Amir Mohammad has also completed a sequel to the film, entitled: "Apa Khabar Orang Kampung" (The Village People Road Show), which focuses on one of the two Peace Villages located in Sukirin, Narathiwat Province of Southern Thailand. Two of the interviewees in the book, "Life as the River Flows" live there. This second film of his is also banned by the Malaysian government.

An explanation about the anti-insurgency and national security law in Malaysia and Singapore, known as the Internal Security Act (ISA)

The Internal Security Act (ISA) is a law imposed by the British colonial government to crush the communist insurgency and the left-wing progressive movements (e.g. student and workers' movements) in Malaysia and Singapore from 1948 onwards. This law was used rampantly to incarcerate hundreds of thousands of activists in both Malaysia and Singapore during the Martial Law (or Emergency) period and afterwards. When the Japanese were defeated in World War II and had to retreat from Southeast Asia, the British colonial government returned to Malaysia and Singapore to re-establish their control. In order to stem out the growing popularity and influence of the communist and left-wing led forces, which were actively organizing legally and openly after the war, Martial Law was imposed by the British in 1948.

Even though Malaysia and Singapore have become independent since 1963 and 1965 respectively, this draconian law which gives both governments full power to detain anyone suspected to be a 'security risk to the country', for an indefinite period of time and without trial, has never been repealed. Even until the late 1990s, political dissidents and critics of the Malaysian and Singaporean governments continue to be arrested and imprisoned under this law. Recently, there have been signs that the same law is being used to imprison suspected 'Islamic terrorists' too.

Other books by Agnes Khoo are:

"Malaysia - 45 Years under the Internal Security Act" written by Koh Swe Yong and Translated by Agnes Khoo (pub. by SIRD, Malaysia, 2004)

"The Voiceless" - Life Stories of Young Women Workers in the Free-Trade Zones of Shenzhen, China. (Edited by Pun Ngai and Li Wanwei, translated by Agnes Khoo, to be published)

See: <http://www.chinastudygroup.org>

Agnes Khoo was also part of the Editorial Committee for the following three books, published by Asian Regional Exchange for a New Alternative (ARENA), an Asian-based NGO formerly located in Hong Kong and now in Seoul, Korea:

"Nepal: the Maoist insurgency and beyond", Vol. 19, No. 2 - Vol. 20, No. 1, Arjun Karki and Mukunda Kattel (ed.), in the Asian Exchange Series, Hong Kong 2005

"Knowledge, Culture and Livelihood - The Struggle for Water and People's Everyday Resistances", Vol. 21, No. 2 - Vol. 22, No. 1, Kevin Li (ed.), in the Asian Exchange Series, Hong Kong 2006

"Communiqué - Looking Back; Looking Forward: Envisioning a New ARENA", Jayanthi Kuru-Utumpala and Agnes Khoo (ed.), January 2006, Seoul, Korea

The fairer side of Malayan communism

by James Wong Wing On

(Excerpt of Book Review by James Wong, which first appeared on 24 September 2004 at: www.malaysiakini.com, a progressive alternative media site by Malaysian activists and journalists)

Given her academic credentials, command of three languages and various Chinese dialects, as well as 15 years of exposure to Europe and Asia, Singapore-born Agnes Khoo could have reaped riches and influence by penning the biographies or speeches of some powerful ruling politicians or businessmen. However, the 40-year-old PhD candidate at Britain's University of Manchester has decided to do something she feels is more meaningful intellectually and fulfilling morally. She recently published a book compiling the oral accounts of the life experiences of 16 female rank-and-file members of the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) now residing in southern Thailand. The book is titled "Life As The River Flows - Women In The Malayan Anti-Colonial Struggle" (Kuala Lumpur, SIRD, 2004)

Childhood curiosity

According to Agnes, her curiosity about the Malayan communists began as a child in Singapore, where her father, after involving himself in organising the International Labour Day celebrations in 1965, was detained under the preventative security law for allegedly being a communist. The disappearance of her father in what she now calls 'white terror' took place just several weeks after Agnes was born. For a while, she was communist-phobic but it later became a kind of curiosity. Agnes said her school textbooks failed to satisfy her curiosity, not only about who the Malayan Communists were but also the history of independence in Singapore and Malaysia. So, the search for more convincing answers continued even though she had already read Karl Marx as part of her university's sociology course.

Agnes's personal experience and search is not unique: thousands of working class children born in Peninsular Malaysia and Singapore in the 1960s or early 1970s quietly share with her all or some elements of the circumstances, as well as the curiosity. However, Agnes is still exceptional because, having succeeded in her quest for answers to her childhood questions; she has never forgotten her roots. In fact, she is proud to be identified with them, in her academic project, even as the highly educated intellectual, she now is. The great Italian Marxist and anti-fascist Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) called this kind of intellectual organic.

Confronting circumstance

The 16 women ex-CPM guerrillas told Agnes their personal stories or histories as warriors, daughters, lovers, mothers and grandmothers. These personal stories are also often intertwined with the political environments, within which they found themselves having to make choices and decisions. These circumstances included the Japanese invasion and occupation, the war of resistance, liberation, the return of British colonialism, the period between 1945 and 1948, the 'emergency' in between 1948 and 1960, the second 'emergency' in the 1970s and the period leading to the signing of the 1989 Peace Accord between the Communist Party of Malaya and the governments of Malaysia as well as Thailand.

Indeed, as Karl Marx himself insightfully observed: "Men (and women) make their own history, but not of their own free will; not under circumstances they themselves have chosen but under the given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly confronted." (Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte in Survey From Exile*, London, Penguin, 1977)

When the Japanese invaded Singapore and Malaysia, the some 80,000 British troops were either forced to retreat to India or Australia or interned as prisoners of war after only 70 days of defence. There was only the Communist Party of Malaya which rose to the occasion and took up the challenge, armed the people and led and empowered them to resist tyranny and barbarity.

To assist readers, especially younger ones, to maintain a linear time-line to follow the stories a brief outline of historical background marked by years and important happenings is provided at the beginning of the book. This is certainly very helpful as an intellectual tool to read memoirs, biographies or autobiographies.

Like Alias Chin Peng: "My Side of History" (Singapore, Media Masters, 2003), this collection of stories told by the Malayan Communists is important for us to gain insight into the human ideas and passions prevalent in different circumstances or eras. Under the given or inherited circumstances, the women whose life stories are recorded in this book, are like the millions around them all over the world including Europe, who made decisions to respond, in manners they then saw as the most effective, to what they then felt to be an exploitative and oppressive society.

Of course, memories being memories, the oral accounts may contain factual errors and mistakes on the parts of the sixteen female members of the Communist Party of Malaya, either due to the process of aging or incomplete knowledge or understanding of situations which existed years ago. It is all understandable for normal human beings. "Life As The River Flows - Women in the Malayan Anti-Colonial Struggle" has another edition in Chinese. It is a soft book that is nevertheless filled with hard lessons for all.