

MANAGING PLURALITY: THE POLITICS OF THE PERIPHERY IN EARLY COLD WAR SINGAPORE

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Mainstream histories of the Cold War have tended to reduce the events surrounding Southeast Asian decolonization and nationalism to the universal notions of ideological confrontation, bipolarity, and the global division between a capitalist and communist camp. This obscures how multiple entities – the former colonial powers, different classes and ethnic groups, and local elites of different ideological and political persuasion – come into contention as they negotiate for a place in postcolonial society. Thus this article examines the case of Singapore in the 1950s and 1960s and argues that these forms of contention provincialize experiences with nationalism, communalism, and communism and by so doing disconnect them from the dominant narratives of the Cold War. I examine various texts by British colonial officials, communist and non-communist political figures, and university students that show how British attempts at managing a decolonizing entity were offset by the local intelligentsia’s ambivalence in coming to terms with nationalism and communism.

According to the narratives of “Western bloc” countries, the late 1940s and 1950s occupied a momentous and significant place in the history of the Cold War. This was the era in which the familiar features of the Cold War – communist expansionism, Soviet aggression, bipolarity, nuclear weaponry, the ideological divide between democracy and communist totalitarianism, and the constant anxieties of domestic subversion – came to be rapidly established as having universal relevance. In other words, the many political entities belonging to the “peripheries”, such as the colonial territories of the waning imperial powers or newly independent states, were invariably fused into this Cold War geopolitical landscape. For Western narratives of the Cold War, this was the battle for the hearts and minds of decolonizing states, which were seen to have the potential only to fall rigidly either into the Western camp or communist camp.

This dichotomous nature of Western Cold War narratives makes it difficult to appreciate the fundamental ambivalences attendant upon the relationship between the colonial metropolitan centre and the periphery. This is largely due to the conception that the

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political axis that really mattered was between capitalism and communism, while the colonial core–periphery axis was seen to be transient and inconsequential. In the attempts by Western Cold War narratives to simplify and homogenize global political plurality, they have been largely unable to account for the more heterogeneous nature of nationalism and nationalistically inspired regionalism. For example, in Southeast Asia communism was much more intricately intertwined with nationalism, and the efforts required by nationalist intellectuals in mobilizing the broader population required more disjunctive attempts at negotiating, transforming, and even placating public perceptions of the traditional with the modern requirements of statehood.

This article, therefore, depicts a more troubled relationship between the metropolitan centre and the colonial periphery in the efforts by the former to inscribe the necessary cultural, ideological, and geopolitical positions while still administering a declining empire on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the ambivalent attitudes towards the Cold War among subjects in the periphery. In order to do so, this article undertakes three forms of analysis. First, it focuses on Singapore (and by extension Malaya) in the 1950s because its location in the narratives of the Cold War tends to be notably problematic. While not clearly representative of the experiences of Southeast Asia generally in respect of the Cold War, communism, and nationalism, Singapore provides an interesting insight into how a diverse colonial society responded to Cold War narratives and how even Western perspectives (principally British and American) were divided on how to approach the Singapore problem. Second, the approach this article takes revolves around the “cultural turn” of Cold War studies. To this end it regards historical events, processes, and objects surrounding the Cold War as being culturally constituted and reproduced, as much as they were seen to have materially real and immediate consequences. The textual dimension is important here because the Cold War, at least among the broader middle-class in the US and Western Europe, achieved a sense of realness as people wrote about it, produced imaginative works based on it, and in this way created a culture in which fiction and non-fiction repetitively gave meaning and shape to its intellectual, social, and political topoi. While these texts created a canonical “Cold War consensus”¹ within their immediate European and American audiences, their ability to create a similar consensus within the peripheries where they were exported to is much more uncertain. Hence, the third function this article performs is to question whether or not cultural Cold War studies can be immediately transposed onto the experiences of the Cold War in peripheral Southeast Asia.

These three forms of analysis as deployed here, taken together, demonstrate that during the final (formal) colonial years, Western metanarratives about the Cold War were, at least in Singapore (between 1948 and 1963), subject to more fragmentary impulses, so that the import and consumption of Western Cold War texts in the crown colony are a less reliable guide to understanding the formation of Cold War subjectivities there. Rather, one should think of the cultural Cold War in Singapore as a constant series of negotiations across many discrepant junctures. Even the “Western” representations of communism in Singapore were dogged by a highly mobile set of oppositions between American and

1 The idea of a Cold War consensus suggests that despite plurality in the US, there was ideologically and culturally the presence of a broad, liberalist segment of society that accepted the mainstream perspectives of the Cold War. For a good discussion of this see Corber 1993.

British perceptions about what needed to be done to alleviate the communist crisis in Malaya; and also between the divergent populations toward whom the British adopted varying and sometimes contradictory positions. On the other side of the equation, the nationalist intellectuals were themselves more pragmatic about the role of communism, and while they occasionally reproduced, accepted, or mimicked colonial attitudes towards the Cold War, they were also equally quick to decry these attitudes as colonialist façades.

Thus in this article the discussion follows this order. First, it considers the tensions between the cultural Cold War and the ironies that arise when one tries to interpolate the core–periphery axis that is common in criticisms of contemporary forms of colonialism and imperialism. Second, it homes in more specifically on the period of time in Singaporean and Malayan history commonly known as the Emergency, to show how it too had cultural ramifications. These ramifications subsequently drive the concluding discussion on how representations of communism and the Cold War in Singapore and Malaya are constituted more through a series of cultural interplays across different participants, political objectives, and ideological positions: between the United States (US) and Britain; between British colonial authorities/local Malayan leadership and the peasantry; and between groups representing different nationalist positions in Singapore and the British. In order to discuss these cultural interplays, the article examines various British Foreign Office and Colonial Office papers that document correspondence between colonial officials in Singapore and their counterparts in London. This is to show the delicate balance the British needed to maintain so as to fend off criticisms that they were not taking a hard enough stance on communists while also maintaining order in a communally and ideologically fractious place. Also, the article employs certain “cultural” texts like newspaper annuals and university student publications to demonstrate how different segments of the intelligentsia circumvented the interconnections among nationalism, anticolonialism, communism, and wider linkages to the Cold War in Southeast Asia.

COLD WAR CULTURE AND THE COLONIAL PERIPHERY

Without a doubt, the study of the Cold War has become a vast academic enterprise, spanning different disciplinary perspectives, interpretive modes, and geographical foci, while having varying socio-political utility and consequences. With the inclusion of cultural studies as a means of incorporating more historicist, reflective, and critical stances towards the Cold War,² there appears to be an added intellectual space in which the knowledge-constitutive aspect of Cold War disciplines like international relations, political science, and history and their relation to American political power and anxiety are made more glaringly obvious.³ Notwithstanding, Cold War cultural studies has also yet to engage effectively with the politics of marginality, in which the subaltern (women, people of colour, minority populations, the “Third World”) plays an active, resistive, and even transformative role in making the Cold War “postcolonial”.⁴

2 See Griffith 2001; Appy 2000.

3 See George 1994, pp. 69–89.

4 By “postcolonial” I am referring to the field of studies that now go under the rubric of “postcolonial studies and colonial discourse analysis”. While there is no fixed definition of this field, it uses an axis around which

One example of how the postcolonial has been silenced comes through the privileging of certain axes in the way the Cold War has been constituted. Since the postwar world was becoming bipolar, the axis that mattered was between “West” and “East”.⁵ Although these poles appear to be geographical, they were more ideological in nature. Geographically Eastern-hemispheric and non-communist countries (as in Asia, notably South Korea and Japan) could be identified as part of the “Western bloc”, while the opposite may be true of Soviet satellite-states in Western-hemispheric Europe. This is not to say that the West–East division was necessarily exclusive as mainstream perspectives of the Cold War did recognize alternative axes such as the North–South divide or the “Three Worlds” concept, which segregated the world in terms of economic and industrial wealth, and economic modes of production. Nonetheless these were secondary in nature because their very construction fuelled the idea of West versus East because the “South” or the “Third World” accentuated the presence of poor, newly independent states that would form battlegrounds for Western–Eastern ideological confrontation and serve as proxies for any military conflict between the US and Soviet Union. In the midst of these three axes, the “core–periphery” distinction is arguably more ambivalent since it has largely been ignored in mainstream Cold War discourse. Perceptibly, the “core–periphery” axis derives from Eurocentric international history, in which the European imperial, metropolitan core is seen to be the dominant, controlling, and administrative centre for the colonized and peripheral parts of the world. For the avowedly anticolonial US, the end of the European phase of imperialism at best rendered this axis obsolete and at worst transitional. Any continued use of the core–periphery axis was noted as a Leninist appropriation,⁶ which continued to inform the Soviet interpretation of the Cold War.

Seen in this light, the figurative idea of the “West” as a cultural and ideational (rather than ideological) entity is at once rendered inconsequential since the rational and modern structuring of the Cold War world, its framing as strategic and “geopolitical”, allows very little room for the West–East axis to be seen as anything but a universal category. Consequently, Eurocentrism⁷ remains pervasive even though it appears to have been “written out” of Cold War history. For instance, most histories of the Cold War, regardless of how much international coverage they provide, constantly return to Europe as the focal point at which all phenomena worldwide can be made meaningful and understandable.⁸ Even Akira Iriye’s exceptional *The Cold War in Asia*, which ostensibly tries to relocate

knowledge and culture constitute the interplays between a contingently determined “Western” core and “colonized” periphery. It resists standard “Western” historical narratives about the ending of imperialism but sees empire as a persistent object that is constantly reconstituted. What is of importance in the “postcolonial” is the ability for the “colonized” to be interpreted not as a passive site of colonial influence but as an active and dynamic agent that transforms and resists Western tropes, cultural forms, and knowledge. See for instance works like Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2005 and Williams and Chrisman 1993.

5 See also Yew 2009, pp. 73–74.

6 Lenin 1939.

7 In order to avoid confusion between the “West” as a cultural expression and ideological construction, “Europe” here also includes the US.

8 Even new journals attempting to promote the use of more recently declassified archival documents like *The Journal of Cold War Studies* still focus very heavily on Europe, while only featuring articles about the Cold War outside Europe less frequently.

Asia in the history of the Cold War, relies on Eurocentric but deculturalized tropes of the “international system” to make Asia’s place in Cold War history relevant. Notably, Iriye’s text⁹ does not attempt to uncover “Asian” voices that might disrupt mainstream ideas of the Cold War but falls back on familiar historical terrain. In this case, the Yalta Conference serves as the focal point against which Asia’s place in the Cold War is to be evaluated.

While Iriye’s understandably dated work in no way shares the same retrospective and penetrating perspective of the critical cultural theory that was to come in the wake of the Cold War, the more recent emphasis on the Cold War as a cultural construction should, in principle, demonstrate how it can be interpreted as a culturally variegated historical phenomenon. In brief, the emphasis on textuality, the interconnectedness between Cold War fiction and non-fiction, the relationship between power and knowledge, and the assertion of identity as the basis of foreign policy in the construction of enemies¹⁰ have all been such attempts at questioning the assumed reality and objectivity of the Cold War. Nonetheless, the ability for such methods to provide a means or language for the marginalized to articulate their subjection under the Cold War is more questionable. Particularly, Cold War cultural studies are still largely Euro- or Western-centric as many examples of discourse analyses aim at uncovering the relationship between Western texts and their immediate, primary audience.¹¹ In such cases, the existence of a Cold War consensus and the broad middle-class or middlebrow audience allow for a certain set of texts (usually fiction, film, literature, art, and music) to be widely representative of a community or national context that has been predetermined as the subject of analysis.¹² Methodologically, this is not so readily transplantable in peripheral areas because cultural worldviews, literacy standards, and forms of cultural production do not neatly parallel those found in metropolitan centres. Hence, texts identified as having a Cold War constitutive role may not be received in the same way when they are exported to the periphery. Furthermore, such modes of analysis, as Aijaz Ahmad avers, possess an inherently bourgeois quality that may not represent the unconscious in the developing world the same way they might in the West.¹³

This leads to a conundrum. If the mainstream Cold War “capitalist–communist” axis eclipses the “core–periphery” axis, and while critical Cold War cultural studies may be aware of the latter but nonetheless overemphasize the core or centre, then marginalized or peripheral voices continue to be in danger of obscurity. However, this does not mean that cultural studies cannot assist in this regard as the decentring of the mainstream clears the space for other articulations to follow. Marginalized voices can then resurface and be noted for the way they re-present, misunderstand, subvert, appropriate, and in short, transform what has been understood to be the Cold War in these peripheral areas.¹⁴ By doing so

9 Iriye 1974.

10 Campbell 1998.

11 Krishna 1994.

12 Klein 2003.

13 Ahmad 1992.

14 Ashcroft 2000.

the attempt is not necessarily to uncover a more accurate depiction of the Cold War, but to characterize the heterologic and disjunctive views of that era. The use of Singapore and Malaya within the broader regional context, in this case, does not aim to be globally representative of peripheral reactions to Cold War narratives. Rather it provides a case study that suggests how not only do core–periphery relations remain relevant, but also how the plural late-colonial scene gives rise to diffusive and divergent interpretations of the Cold War.

Emergency Culture

Whenever the internationalized dimension of the Cold War is used in conjunction with the history of Singapore and Malaya, it is the particular period of communist uprisings – both urban activism/subversion and jungle guerrilla warfare – known as “The Emergency” that comes readily to mind. This is because, for the British, the Emergency came to be recognized as part of the larger worldwide strategy of Soviet expansionism with its main protagonists identified as receiving instructions directly from Moscow. The evidence for this came through a mixture of preconceived theories about the intractability of Marxist revolutionism and, more significantly, the outcome of the two Calcutta conferences in 1948. With the attendance of international communist parties at the conferences and the explicit instructions by the Cominform to “seize power ‘by any means’”¹⁵ the attendance by the Malayan communists there and the subsequent uprisings in the peninsula became incontrovertible proof for British policymakers and analysts to conclude that the Emergency was a systematic, organized reign of violence. This violence aimed at nothing less than toppling the Malayan government and replacing it with a pro-Moscow regime, and in this way connected Malaya to the Cold War in Southeast Asia.

However, considering its paradoxical origins, the internal disarray of the Malayan communists, the multifarious reactions of the British and Americans, and the slipperiness with which terms like communism and anticommunism could be applied in the context of nationalism, the relationship between the Emergency and the Southeast Asian Cold War is much more dubious. Notwithstanding the stigma that came to be associated with the Malayan Communist Party (MCP, the Emergency’s main offender), it had ironically once been allied with the colonial authorities. During the Second World War, the MCP formed an anti-Japanese division known as the Malayan People’s Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA) that was supported and trained by the British to face an imminent Japanese invasion. But upon the end of the War and Occupation the MPAJA became a highly contentious force. In the weeks between the cessation of hostilities and the return of British forces (August to September 1945) the MPAJA sought to extend its territorial hold in various parts of Malaya while also punishing collaborators and informants, as well as Japanese troops awaiting repatriation. The MCP leadership instructed MPAJA guerrillas to submit to British authority,¹⁶ which led to their official demobilization in December 1945, and a number of MPAJA leaders received awards from the British. Beneath these formalities, however, the MCP’s pro-communist and anti-imperialist agendas went unchecked, with the

¹⁵ Clutterbuck 1973, p. 56.

¹⁶ Cheah 1987, p. 149.

main force of the MPAJA disappearing underground with unsundered weapons¹⁷ and the MCP adopting an urban strategy, co-opting and recruiting members from various institutions like trade unions and youth and women's organizations within Singaporean civil society. In 1948 the MCP was banned as a legal political entity and it retreated into the Malayan jungles and resumed an armed insurrection – attacking colonial and governmental outposts and personnel, plundering and extorting rural workers like peasants and rubber tappers. Thus, the British saw this as a sign of changing tactics, one that cohered with the instructions passed down at the Calcutta conferences.

However, as Philip Deery points out in a recent article, there was little if any connection with the Southeast Asian Cold War.¹⁸ If anything, the Emergency symbolized internal fissures in the party leadership and lack of organization and coordination as the 1947 departure of its leader, Lai Teck (who was exposed as a triple agent),¹⁹ sent the MCP into crisis. By 1954 the armed insurrection had become a failure, and the MCP leaders once again directed their focus toward urban politics and sought to infiltrate key social movements in Singapore as a means of recruitment as well as advancing their ideological positions. It was also at this juncture that communist and left-leaning political leaders started to collaborate with the fledgling People's Action Party (PAP), which was to come to power – as a result of this collaboration – five years later. It was this collaboration that ultimately blurred the divisions separating communism, socialism, and nationalism from each other.

At this juncture it is also important to note the particular methodology by which the Emergency and the associated communist subversion have been turned into an object of historical knowledge in Singapore. In most cases this historiography, as outlined above, has been derived from archival research, largely in colonial and governmental documents. To this extent the Emergency has not often been understood to be cultural, even though the diverse groups involved in constructing and reproducing the conflict gave rise to contending and shifting perceptions of it. If Western cultural products like popular film, music, art, literature, and the press implicitly or explicitly articulated ideas about communism and the Cold War in the 1950s and 1960s, and Singaporean audiences voraciously consumed them, would this not suggest a means by which the Western imagination of the Cold War came to be transplanted into Singapore? Conversely, if the cultural scene in Singapore were to be perceived as more heterogeneous – due to its multiethnic setting, sourcing of cultural material from not just the “West” – could Cold War discourses come to be constituted differently?²⁰ The first scenario suggests Singaporean subjectivity

17 *Ibid.*, p. 259.

18 Deery 2007.

19 With the assumption of the party leadership by Chin Peng, internal pressures forced the MCP to abandon its policy of peaceful, open cooperation with the British, since this was the approach that Lai Teck took.

20 It is important to note that Singapore and Malaya's ethnic composition played an important role in the culture of the Emergency. Both Singapore and Malaya are made up of an indigenous component as well as migrant populations from China, India, and the surrounding region. These ethnic groups were in general occupationally typecast, maintaining varying affinities with their homelands and responding differently to calls for ethnic and territorial nationalism. In this way, ideological indoctrination became highly fragmented, leaving ideological proponents different possibilities for recruitment or finding sympathizers. While anticolonial nationalism appeared to be transracial, its specific appeal needed to be moulded (particularly in Malaya) in racial terms. Likewise communism also became racialized, with the MCP/MPAJA made up mostly of ethnic Chinese. Understandably a good account of Emergency culture will therefore need to consider a

to be one of Western mimicry, while the second represents a more complex cultural interaction. But whatever the case may be there has certainly been a lack of inquiry into how the cultural scene in Singapore responded to Western Cold War texts and if the end result of this was a consciousness of the Cold War that was markedly different from that of Western metropolitan centres. In this connection, thinking about the Emergency as “cultural” has a number of implications, which the following discussion on the pluralistic cultural scene in Singapore attempts to establish.

Managing Plurality

Throughout this article, the reference to “mainstream” narratives of the Cold War is intended to acknowledge, by inversion, the existence of alternative and more divergent worldviews that reworked or appropriated international politics. Hence, rather than the usual histories of the Cold War hierarchically offering a top-down explanation for all other worldwide social and political phenomena, these marginalized views attempted to reposition alternative histories like nationalism, anticolonialism, and imperialism as counter-narratives rather than as events reducible to the Cold War. Thus in Singapore, although rampant communist activities throughout the 1950s and early 1960s were observed by Britain and the US as part of the Southeast Asian Cold War, the actual responses by the Western powers and the heterogeneous factions forged out of the local populations, and the way they interacted among themselves, produced a much more problematic picture of the Cold War. For instance, were the British and Americans unanimous in their assessments of communist activity in Singapore? Were the communists to be simply identified as one of the many factions in Malaya and Singapore scrambling for power at that time? Were they an ethnically based anticolonial movement? Or were they acting on behalf of the Comintern working towards a regime subservient to Moscow or Beijing?

From the 1950s onwards, the British administration in Malaya started to interpret the Emergency as solidly linked to the Cold War in Southeast Asia, and China’s “fall” to communism as well as the guerrilla warfare adopted by the MCP in the Malayan jungles undoubtedly contributed to this view. In various open or confidential Western documents, the dangers were articulated in no uncertain terms. Malcolm MacDonald, the Commissioner-General for the UK in South East Asia, for example, wrote in a Singaporean annual in 1951 that Malaya had become integrated into “Southern Asia” and the “free nationalism” that it sought was becoming jeopardized by “an opposite movement which seeks to invade Southern Asia and counter the advance of more or less democratic national freedom.”²¹ And in private circles, British Foreign Office documents contained in the set FO 371/84482 recorded statements about Malaya’s threatened position in the Southeast Asian Cold War and outlined efforts needed to counter it.²² As Deery

wide array of cultural texts published not just in English, but also in Chinese, Malay, and Tamil. Apart from the necessary linguistic abilities, such an undertaking requires time and space, and will have to be left for the future.

21 MacDonald 1951, p. 25.

22 Foreign Office 1950; Colonial Office 1953.

opines, the willingness by the British to have spent between £500 and 700 million by 1950 to combat the armed insurrection, considering its overstretched resources during the immediate postwar period,²³ demonstrates the conviction that the Emergency had larger strategic implications for regional security.

The US response to the events in Malaya and to British actions was, interestingly, one of disappointment and disapproval. While both the British and American governments mutually acknowledged the consequences of unchecked communist activities there, the British were seen to be ineffective. In part this was due to the way the British downplayed the communist threat when they communicated with rural Malayan populations. But more significantly, when the MCP abandoned guerrilla warfare and returned to an urban campaign of subversion in 1954, American policymakers were no longer confident that the British would realistically be able to contain it. By that time, the MCP had once again infiltrated Chinese schools, trade unions, the universities, and political parties in Singapore. Of particular concern was the rising star of the (now ruling) People's Action Party and the way it had become dominated by individuals associated with the MCP and espoused a platform fuelled by socialism, communism, and anticolonialism. In the lead-up to the 1959 general elections, the PAP had become extremely successful in mobilizing support among Singapore's broader Chinese population, and the Americans became alarmed by the prospect that the new government would be formed by a communist party:

My personal opinion is that Singapore is probably already lost and little can be done to save it from Communist domination in the near future. If this should occur the effect will, of course, be explosive in Malaya and all over Southeast Asia. I do not wish to be an alarmist but I think we had better face up to realities before we are confronted with even more bitter alternatives.²⁴

In planning for this eventuality, confidential policy documents indicated that the US government would support British abrogation of the Rendel Constitution, the British blueprint directing Singapore's elections and paving the way for self-government, as a last resort.²⁵ On a larger scale, US officials at the State and Defense Departments also charted out their own (supposedly complementary) strategy to combat the spread of communism in Singapore. This involved co-opting local trade unions into the activities of their Western counterparts, supporting educational activities in Singapore, using the US Information Service to disseminate both negative and positive propaganda, and introducing a "pro-Free World" press.²⁶

In general these differences between American and British reactions to communism brought into view the difficulties of reconciling rhetoric and the practical implementation of policy. While the British and Americans were prepared to share the same grand perceptions of the Cold War, they were divided by unique circumstances. As an empire on the

23 Deery 2007, pp. 31–32.

24 Young, 1956, p. 765.

25 See Dulles 1956a, p. 767; Robertson 1956, p. 770.

26 Operations Coordinating Board 1955, pp. 744–54; Dulles 1956b, pp. 756–59.

decline, the British had to administer fractious and nationalistically charged colonies while rebuilding its own metropolitan centre. Consequently, its attempt to inculcate a Cold War discourse in Malaya was split into several contradictory methods, each of which varied according to the local group they intended to co-opt. For Western residents living in Singapore, the Western Cold War subjectivity naturally found an easy foothold, and the mass media they consumed or the social circles they connected with provided means for ideas of the Cold War to reproduce. In English language dailies like *The Straits Times* and *The Singapore Standard* in 1954, headlines²⁷ such as “Reds Invade Cambodia: Dien Bien Phu Inner Defence Is Penetrated”, “Defence Shield for SE-A Backed to Beat off Red Threat”, “Can Siam Remain a Bastion against Reds in S.E. Asia?”, and “Malaya and the Cold War” all presume the existence of a discursive community among their readership that is familiar with the metaphors, labels, and geopolitical implications within the narratives of the Cold War. Furthermore, in *The Straits Times Annual* of 1952, for example, three different articles – an autobiographical account of a British planter’s wife coping with life in the Emergency,²⁸ a rosy description of resettling squatters as part of the Briggs Plan,²⁹ and a write-up of the effectiveness of an anti-communist jungle squad³⁰ – textually reinforced both the dangers of “Communist terrorism” and the ability of the authorities to overcome them.

For the diverse quarters comprised of the rural and indigenous populations, the working-class, the Chinese educated groups, and so on, the British collaborated with the local ruling elites to present an image of communism that was markedly different. While there is some information to suggest that other Western actors, such as the United States Information Service, were established in Singapore to propagandize American democracy as more desirable than communism,³¹ there is little evidence to ascertain whether or not joint British–local elites attempted to actively “educate” the masses to the regional implications of the Emergency and the Cold War. In effect, it seems more likely that the masses were more concerned about basic issues of livelihood, domestic law and order, and maintaining peaceful ties with members of other ethnic groups. To this end, the British were prepared to direct propaganda that met these needs, hence they played down the external support of the communists so as to portray them as isolated, weakened, and therefore within the easy control of the British and local militia.³² They also tried to label communists as “bandits”, suggesting to the masses the clear and present threat to their financial and economic well-being. This term was to be further reified through

27 “Reds Invade Cambodia” 1954; “Defence Shield” 1954; “Can Siam Remain a Bastion” 1954; “Malaya and the Cold War” 1954.

28 Bradford 1952.

29 The Briggs Plan was an operation to move isolated squatters across Malaya to temporary communities that were protected by wire fences and police posts. This was intended to make them more difficult targets for communist insurgents (Miller 1952).

30 Brooke-Wavell 1952.

31 Baker 2005, p. 194.

32 See Ramakrishna 2002, p. 78. Ramakrishna acknowledges that such an approach was not successful. Apart from the fact that British propaganda did not have a sufficiently extensive reach, it failed to induce confidence because the language used was similar to that adopted by the Japanese and the KMT. Since the latter did not succeed in containing communists, the audience of the propaganda (the rural Chinese) felt, by association, that the British would “fail as well” (*ibid.*).

social practices, and between February and April 1950 an “Anti-Bandit Month” was organized, mobilizing 420,000 people to work with security forces in an anti-insurgent operation. The “month” saw the mass issuance of publicity materials, radio talks, and speeches while participants helped conduct road checks and assist in squatter resettlement.³³ In one of the official Anti-Bandit Month publications, for instance, the image of the communist as a bandit was given characteristics that spoke to different ethnic communities in various ways. In general, the “bandits” were seen as hindering education, the conduct of trade unions in Malaya, and they were also seen to disrupt the financial livelihood for the Chinese, subvert Islam for Malays, and were identified as having become outcasts in India for the Malayan Indians.³⁴

Following criticisms by the British Foreign Office on the myopic nature of “bandit”, the term was gradually phased out and replaced by “Communist terrorist”. In Deery’s estimation, the new appellation more appropriately reconnected the Emergency to the Cold War while “terrorist” invoked the disruptive and diabolical visage of the MCP.³⁵ However, whether or not this indicates a greater tendency to communicate the regional and geopolitical connections of the Emergency to the masses is still unclear. In the 1957 governmental publication *The Danger and Where It Lies*, the Cold War once again played a peripheral role. The main “danger” the document outlines was the immediate threat to overthrow the new Malayan nation and to replace it with a communist regime. The violence used by communists was seen to be an entity “in itself” rather than having a more final purpose. As the document reminds, the “Communist creed is a creed of violence. The Malayan Communists have never abandoned violence; they only soft-pedal it when they think it will serve their temporary interests to do so.”³⁶

Of all the moments in which the British appeared to depart from the US-based perspective of the Cold War and to play political factions against each other, none comes closer than the controversial “Eden Hall Tea Party” in July 1961. In that event, four pro-communist members of the PAP held a secret meeting with the UK Commissioner-General for Southeast Asia, Lord Selkirk, and asked if the British would take any action if leftist elements seized political power in Singapore. Selkirk’s reply was that the British wanted to see the constitution of Singapore enforced and would therefore not intervene unless things turned violent or if the constitution was infringed.³⁷ The outcome of the meeting had various consequences and interpretations. Almost immediately, the non-communist members of the PAP, which included Lee Kuan Yew and Goh Keng Swee, saw this as a “British Plot” to side with the communists against the leadership of the party,³⁸ but this rhetoric was later toned down in favour of assumptions that Selkirk and the British were playing a dangerous albeit cunning game of “political duplicity.”³⁹

33 *Ibid.*, pp. 79–80.

34 Department of Public Relations 1950.

35 Deery 2003, p. 246.

36 Information Services 1957, pp. 49–50.

37 Moore 1961a.

38 Ball 1999, p. 174.

39 Yap, Lim, and Leong 2009, p. 205.

Particularly, the British did this to trick the communists into coming out in the open to challenge the PAP, which would then leave the non-communists no alternative but to suppress them.⁴⁰ In addition, as Lee further notes in his memoirs, the British hoped this would demonstrate to the Tunku⁴¹ the dangers Malaya would face if it did not agree to the merger.⁴² Notwithstanding this, the British denied the existence of such designs⁴³ and Selkirk remained adamant that he would indeed have accepted a “left or even communist-manipulated government” so long as “the full democratic processes [were allowed] to work under the constitution...”.⁴⁴

The differences between the surprising acceptance by the British of a potential communist regime in Singapore and the responses of the British-educated local intelligentsia, therefore, demonstrate how local political conditions and the interests of a waning colonial power cannot fit so neatly into a strictly anti-communist rhetoric within a mainstream Cold War discourse. The role of the local intelligentsia, particularly in Singapore, needs to be observed for the complex picture it presents. By intelligentsia I am referring not just to elites who have assumed political power, such as local members of the Singapore Legislative Assembly, but also groups that have some form of intellectual, emotional, and cultural powers of suasion over the broader urban proletariat. The intelligentsia therefore also comprises students, educators, and English-educated professionals. And in particular these diverse groups of people have tended to play a more subversive role either intentionally or unintentionally in transforming core meanings of the Cold War. For instance, in the Legislative Assembly, Singapore’s first taste of self-legislation, the Emergency or associated communist activities were seen as local manifestations of immediately local strains of communism. In the sessional paper on “The Communist Threat in Singapore”, for example, no attempt was made to link Singapore communism with international communism, and the paper limited itself to the domestic operations of the MCP.⁴⁵

Such an illustration is, of course, token but it points to a larger, disjunctive, and more convoluted nature of local political culture in which alignments and cleavages continuously pivoted around different positions. In other words, the intelligentsia could over one particular matter appear to support the colonial government while conflict trenchantly with it over another. Particularly, they could on the one hand appear willing to accept British views on the danger of communist violence, but could just as quickly refute these as ideas privileging British colonial interests or dampening the thrust of nationalism. For the purpose of this discussion, there are four common positions that govern these alignments: the attempt at fostering solidarity with other parts of nationalist Southeast Asia; the tendency to use socialism as a platform for nationalism, especially as an attempt to address problems of social justice wrought by colonialism; and the appropriation of

40 Moore 1961b.

41 Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaya’s prime minister, who at that time was still lukewarm to the idea of a political merger between Malaya and Singapore.

42 Lee 1998, p. 383.

43 Moore 1961b.

44 Quoted in Yap, Lim, and Leong 2009, p. 207.

45 Legislative Assembly 1957.

democracy as an anticolonial weapon. And in order to illustrate this I shall discuss the tensions contained in student publications in the University of Malaya in the 1950s, *The Malayan Undergrad*, *The New Cauldron*, and *Fajar*.⁴⁶

On the surface, each of these publications, belonging to different student bodies and associations, seemed to serve different interests. Being the main student newspaper and the organ of the University of Malaya Students' Union, *The Malayan Undergrad* was intended to disseminate campus news, while *The New Cauldron*, the publication of the Raffles Society (the university Literary, Debating, and Drama Society), served as a vehicle for literary and cultural expression. However, during the epochal period of the 1950s, the university became a prime site of political consciousness. As such categorical delineations were merely nominal, every publication – especially the University Socialist Club's *Fajar* – was political in many respects. For instance, these publications delved into a whole host of social and political issues confronting contemporary Malaya; which included nationalism and the future of Malaya, Malayan identity, the role of socialism, the idea of neutralism, the tyranny of imperialism, and responses to recent government actions.

On a number of occasions, publications like *The Malayan Undergrad* appeared to articulate the colonial line about the Cold War. In one instance, a November 1951 article responding to the killing of the university Pro-Chancellor Henry Gurney by “communist bandits” in the previous month, condemned the violent tactics of the communists and attempted to refute the anti-imperialist objectives of such actions. However, no sooner was this expressed than the article elevated the discussion to the more universal context of humanity and mankind instead of the usual struggle between democracy and communism.⁴⁷ These forms of appropriation and decontextualism can be seen in many more articles that were discernibly more anticolonial. In a fair few articles there were explicit attempts aimed at delinking nationalism from the Cold War, emphasizing regional solidarity, embarking on more “neutralist” stances, and prioritizing social problems like communalism as being more dire than communism.⁴⁸ An article in *The New Cauldron* articulates a sentiment that recurred in the university publications:

We in Malaya, are not concerned whether America kills Russia or Russia annihilates America. But we object and we object vigorously to being dragged into the conflict. We are not too strong to fight and we are not too weak to be left alone. We pray that we may escape the ensnarling net. Whoever wins we still lose.⁴⁹

In such instances the tactic has been one of reemphasizing the presence of a core–periphery axis, even when it seemed to be supplanted by other axes under the weight of mainstream perspectives of international politics. The controversial *Fajar* article (the

46 Although there are other sources that could have been used to exemplify these four positions I use these student publications because they not only represent a broad spectrum of the views harboured by students but they are also particularly clear articulations of positions taken by an up and coming generation of leaders.

47 “Our Greatest Loss” 1951, p. 1.

48 Wyatt 1960, p. 6.

49 Hsu 1950/51, p. 7.

consequences of its publication will be mentioned below), “Aggression in Asia”, further reinforced “Asian” reluctance to be pulled into conflicts and defence pacts that seemed alien to them:

The prospect of Asia “going communist” has been responsible in a large measure for every major Western concession ranging from Indian Independence to land for the Chinese squatter in Malaya. Is it therefore surprising that the spectre of Communism haunting the West should leave Asia unperturbed? Is it any wonder that Asia will have nothing to do with anti-communist fronts? For that is not our problem. We need peace and freedom. The solidarity of Asia is the solidarity of the suppressed. This alone is our fight and we will be dragged into no other. Our sympathies are with all people like us who are thirsting for peace and freedom. We are therefore comrades, of the Africans struggling for the most elementary human rights, of the Indo-Chinese fighting for his freedom. Our enemies are those who would deny us these rights.⁵⁰

Attempts to appropriate and decontextualize the Cold War could also be seen from the manner in which socialism and democracy were reinvested as relevant categories in the Malayan nationalist agenda. While the concept of socialism was used pejoratively and synonymously with communism particularly in the United States, among the nationalist intellectuals in Singapore, socialism came to be seen as the driving force for addressing problems like poverty, health, and education that became obvious at the end of colonialism. In these publications, particularly *Fajar*, the idea of socialism became subjected to greater airing as expectations of students’ responsibilities and the different Marxist and non-Marxist dimensions of the concept became constantly negotiated as a potential platform for the future of independent Singapore.⁵¹ What has also been notable has been the manner in which “democracy” was also used to point out contradictions in Western governance and to reappropriate it as an idea consistent with the practices of the nationalist intellectuals. In this connection, many articles faulted the British government for its use of arbitrary arrest and detention as a way of silencing suspected communists. This criticism was used as a challenge against increased pronouncements by the British that self-government for Malaya and Singapore were in the offing because of its contradictory nature: colonial use of powers of detention were not compatible with the democratic pretensions of self-government.⁵²

In order to portray the Cold War as a contentious discourse – the lack of coherence between US and British reactions to communism in Malaya; the contradictory practices adopted by the British government as it sought to address, inform, and educate different colonial audiences; and the fissiparous role played by nationalist intellectuals as they appropriated and transformed meanings of the Cold War – this article has used a number

50 “Aggression in Asia” 1954, p. 1.

51 Koh 1960, p. 2; “Socialism – 1” 1953; Nadeswaran 1953.

52 “Emergency and the University” 1951, p. 4; “Council to Protest Against Students’ Detention” 1951, p. 1; “Democracy’ Comes to Malaya” 1954, p. 1; Chua 1954, p. 3; “One More Step to the Rear” 1954, p. 1.

of textual instances from a variety of sources. This necessarily begs the question of how representative they may be of the larger phenomena that may be claimed to exist. For instance, can the heterogeneous and complex nature of the local colonial population in Singapore be adequately represented by university publications that are intended for a specific readership and are based on certain political objectives? Furthermore are there potentially more texts in other languages and in other modes and genres that could illustrate a broader localized anticolonial discourse and consciousness?

These concerns notwithstanding, the emphasis on university publications in the 1950s illustrates a dynamism that anticipated nationalist politics in the 1960s. Let me reexamine the case of *Fajar* in this context. As the mouthpiece of university socialism, the journal's radicalism is unsurprising. Regardless of British suspicions that it had become dominated by a pro-communist editorial board, *Fajar's* readership and authorship had, by the early 1960s, consisted of individuals like Lee Kuan Yew, S. Rajaratnam, and Tommy Koh who were to dominate the future Singaporean political leadership. Lee, for instance, was the legal adviser to the Socialist Club and acted as co-counsel for the *Fajar* editorial board members when they were arrested and tried for sedition on the publication of "Aggression in Asia."⁵³ This form of "fellow-travelling" paralleled what was happening in party politics, as the PAP began to collaborate intimately with communists. What follows is a well-known story. As far as *Fajar's* interests were concerned, the initial collaboration persisted after the PAP's electoral victory in 1959, and was particularly strengthened since the ending of its four-year ban coincided with the PAP success. One year later, *Fajar* became increasingly anti-government, especially with the expulsion of Ong Eng Guan⁵⁴ from the party ranks and the impending merger with Malaysia. Although this suggests that *Fajar* started to occupy a different discourse at this point, the divergence more fittingly captures the essence of political concerns that were more interested in localized concerns and differing interpretations of nationhood than the more Western-inspired grand theories of the Cold War. By examining texts like *Fajar* it is possible to accentuate the context of an alternative discourse.

CONCLUSION

I have thus far demonstrated that for any attempt to re-present the Cold War in the Singapore of the 1950s, the usual discourse surrounding the Western–Eastern divide and the geopolitical confrontation between an aggressive communist camp and a defensively democratic-capitalist camp is insufficient. To a large extent, such a mainstream discourse eclipses an entire array of contending, alternative discourses that sought to be presented outside the political and historical hierarchies posited by the Cold War. In effect these alternative discourses attempted to reassert the core–periphery axis that revalidated the presence of colonial discourse even at a time when Empire appeared to be in retreat, and give meaning to matters arising from the heterogeneity of Singaporean society and its own internal battles over what nationalism meant.

53 Drysdale 1984, p. 78.

54 Left-wing PAP member whose expulsion from the PAP caused mass defections of pro-communist members and the subsequent creation of the Barisan Sosialis (Socialist Front).

This has a number of implications. For one, in wider ruminations on international Cold War history and cultural studies, it suggests that the “local” needs to be assessed as an active site in which meanings, issues, and different priorities shape and transform narratives about communism, global domination, and so on. It also suggests how the Cold War needs to be provincialized,⁵⁵ and as such, the so-called decolonizing territories of Southeast Asia interpreted it as being more fragmentary than holistic; hence nationalism, regionalism, and localism need to be aligned with histories unique to their own specific contexts. Finally, in the analysis of Singapore, I have in no way attempted to present a comprehensive view of how different communities there might have challenged mainstream discourses on the Cold War. Only the conflicting British–American and the “nationalist intelligentsia” discourses were presented. This, as I have stressed repeatedly, has been suggestive. For a more thorough account of these different communities, it would be necessary to consider texts published in other languages, other forms of cultural exchange, and the particularities of these communities.

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55 On this notion of “provincialization” see Chakrabarty 2000.

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