

The Chinese International of Nationalities: the Chinese Communist Party, the Comintern, and the foundation of the Malayan National Communist Party, 1923–1939*

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Abstract

In the global ideological movements of the early twentieth century, notably communism, new political concepts moved across different cultures. Together with the process of internationalization, this led to problems concerning the translation and interpretation of linguistic terms. Based on little-studied sources deposited in the Comintern archive in Moscow, this article shows that, although the members of the newly formed Malayan Communist Party (1930) were virtually all Chinese, it became the first organization to discuss directly the possibility of a multi-ethnic Malayan nation within the borders of the Malay Peninsula. As the Comintern encouraged the establishment of 'national' communist parties, the ambiguity of the Chinese word minzu resulted in the emergence of a discourse regarding the Malayan 'nation', which would be liberated from colonialism under communist leadership.

Keywords Chinese migration, Comintern, globalization, internationalism, Malayan Communist Party, nationalism

The emergence of global ideological movements at the end of the nineteenth century, and the movement of new political concepts across very different cultures, meant that by 1930 the process of internationalization had led to problems concerning the translation and interpretation of linguistic terms. This was especially true in regard to communism, where

* I am grateful to Timothy Cheek, John Fitzgerald, Michael Hathaway, Liu Hong, Steven Hugh Lee, Yeh Wen-hsin, and the members of the China Studies Group at the University of British Columbia, as well as to two anonymous readers and the editors of this journal for their invaluable suggestions. My thanks also go to Yeap Chong Leng, Lin Hsiao-ting, Paul Alexander Rae, and Konstantin Tertitski for help in acquiring sources, to Craig Smith for useful discussions, and to Matthias von dem Knesebeck for translations from German.

ideological vocabularies carried connotations that were often alien to societies where they were introduced. The Malay Peninsula, which as ‘British Malaya’ came under colonial control between 1874 and 1919, provides an intriguing case study because here communism encountered a large migrant population from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. According to the 1921 census, nearly half the population of around 3,358,000 were either Indians (14.2%) or Chinese (35%), although colonial officials assumed that the majority of these were transients.¹ This view was not shared by the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), which was established in 1930 with the help of the Comintern. Though the members of the newly formed MCP were virtually all Chinese, it became the first organization to discuss directly the possibility of a multi-ethnic Malayan nation within the borders of the Malay Peninsula.

This article will focus on the local and global factors that together contributed to the emergence of Malayan nationalism within the MCP prior to Britain’s entrance into the Second World War and the Japanese invasion of Malaya. It will also show how linguistic slippage became the medium by which a nation was ‘imagined’ and thus will underline the role of language in laying the basis for national consciousness.² British Malaya’s complex environment, with three major ethnic and linguistic communities living alongside each other but with English as an official language, made the application of the terms ‘nation’ and ‘people’ difficult. In MCP discourse, a Chinese term meaning ‘nation’/‘nationality’/‘race’/‘ethnic group’/‘national’, *minzu*, came to mean ‘Malayan nation’. The case of *minzu* is an example of how different understandings of a single word had far-reaching consequences. Globalizing forces and the circulation of people and ideas about internationalism transformed Comintern directives into a tool used by Chinese communists to envisage a Malayan nation that could be developed along the lines of a multi-ethnic Soviet Union.³ The intersection of Comintern strategies and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) support for the Chinese revolution on behalf of the Malayan nation shows that nationalism and internationalism can become one in particular historical circumstances.

Interwar globalization

During the interwar period various international organizations, such as Protestant missions, adopted the dual concepts of internationalization (making an idea relevant for the good of the world) and indigenization (involving locals in a foreign organization) as their modus operandi.⁴ By the 1930s these well-established trends can also be seen in the indigenization

1 Cheah Boon Kheng, *Red star over Malaya: resistance and social conflict during and after the Japanese occupation of Malaya, 1941–1946*, Singapore: National University of Singapore, 2003, p. 3.

2 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, London: Verso, 1991, pp. 44–6.

3 For the MCP’s ‘national’ outlook, see Sze-Chieh Ng, ‘Silenced revolutionaries: challenging the received view of Malaya’s revolutionary past’, MA Thesis, Arizona State University, 2011, p. 21; C. C. Chin, ‘The revolutionary programmes and their effect on the struggle of the Malayan communist party’, in C. C. Chin and Karl Hack, eds., *Dialogues with Chin Peng: new light on the Malayan Communist Party*, Singapore: National University of Singapore, 2005, pp. 260–78.

4 Dana L. Robert, ‘The first globalization: the internationalization of the Protestant missionary movement between the world wars’, in Ogbu Kalu, ed., *Interpreting contemporary Christianity: global processes and local identities*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2008, pp. 93–130.

and internationalization of the Chinese revolution by the Comintern and by two Chinese parties, the Nationalist Party (Guomindang, GMD) and the CCP. The unintended consequences of the connections between these organizations and the activities of the Chinese revolutionaries in the ‘Southern Seas’ (Nanyang, meaning Southeast Asia) casts a fresh light on the ways in which both MCP nationalism and the Comintern’s ideas about indigenization were used for mobilization purposes. The history of the MCP demonstrates that international forces also exercised a significant influence in territorializing nations, a central feature of the interwar world order after the First World War peace settlement failed to solve colonial problems.⁵ As in other transnational identities that provided the basis for ‘pan-movements’ – Slavic, Islamic, African – that had emerged during the nineteenth century, interwar internationalism also became significant as a vehicle for national identities because it provided an international legitimization for national sovereignty.⁶

In Southeast Asia, the Western concept of nation-states, though accepted by indigenous nationalists, had been shaped by the geopolitical limits of colonial and pre-colonial polities, in combination with colonial concepts of boundaries and ethnic policies.⁷ During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the exclusion and xenophobia generated by increasing Chinese migration into Southeast Asia and the Pacific region fostered the nationalism of host countries and helped strengthen the idea of territorial borders.⁸ In Southeast Asia the new nations imagined by Chinese communists were based on colonial-constructed entities. However, such views were also shaped by the Comintern-fostered internationalism that infused Chinese nationalism and helped to ground the ‘ungrounded empire’ of Chinese networks in the Nanyang.⁹ The ‘Malaya’ conceived by the MCP would become a ‘nation’ through the efforts of a ‘national’ communist party consisting of Chinese immigrants who simultaneously aspired to an ethnically inclusive Pan-Asian liberation.

Internationalization and indigenization: the Chinese revolution and the liberation of the oppressed *minzu*

Given the history of Chinese ideas about global interconnections expressed in ancient concepts such as *tianxia* (‘all under heaven’) or *da tong* (‘great unity’), the Pan-Asian ethos of the Chinese revolution, and Sun Yatsen’s own discussions of internationalism (*shijie zhuyi*), it is not surprising to note the convergence of nationalism and internationalism in the May

5 Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian moment: self-determination and the international origins of anticolonial nationalism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

6 Cemil Aydin, *The politics of anti-Westernism in Asia: visions of world order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian thought*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2007, pp. 4, 201–3.

7 Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam mapped: a history of the geo-body of a nation*, Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1994; David Henley, ‘Ethnogeographic integration and exclusion in anticolonial nationalism: Indonesia and Indochina’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 37, 2, 1995, pp. 286–324.

8 Sebastian Conrad and Klaus Mühlhahn, ‘Global mobility and nationalism: Chinese migration and the re-territorialization of belonging, 1880–1910’, in Sebastian Conrad and Dominic Sachsenmaier, eds., *Competing visions of world order: global moments and movements, 1880s–1930s*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, pp. 181–212.

9 Christopher E. Goscha, *Going Indochinese: contesting concepts of space and place in French Indochina*, Copenhagen: NIAS, 2012; Aihwa Ong and Donald Nonini, *Ungrounded empires: the cultural politics of modern Chinese transnationalism*, New York: Routledge, 1997.

Fourth movement and in the Comintern's affirmation of that vision when the CCP was founded in 1921.¹⁰ The globalization of Chinese associations started with the emergence of Chinese nationalism as manifested in the transnational Save the Emperor Society (Bao Huang Hui) in the early 1900s.¹¹ This continued in the transnational organizations of the GMD and CCP. Pre-existing ideas of an interconnected world and aspirations for a just world were linked to new ideas of national identification and world communist revolution that were transported into the diasporic networks where long-held Chinese migrant ideas about the need for assimilation into local society and the policies of re-sinicization by the Nanjing GMD were at work. Just as the Bolsheviks drew on tsarist imperial borderland policies, the CCP appropriated Comintern internationalism while inheriting imperial borderland policies of the Qing dynasty passed through GMD internationalism, which focused on the joint liberation of the Chinese and indigenous peoples.¹²

The anti-colonial struggles of Cuba and the Philippines also provided a stimulus for the emergence of Chinese nationalism.¹³ Although the first anti-imperialist league (AIL) was established in the United States to protest the annexations of the Philippines and Cuba, the beginning of anti-imperial leagues in East Asia was marked by the establishment of Pan-Asian societies in the early 1900s in Japan and Shanghai.¹⁴ In 1924, Sun Yatsen defined Pan-Asianism as 'the question of what suffering Asian nations should do in order to resist the powerful nations of Europe. In other words, the great question focused on the elimination of injustices towards oppressed peoples.'¹⁵ The second anti-imperialist league, established with Comintern funding, began as the 'Hands-Off China' society created by the Workers International Relief, based in Berlin. In 1926 at the Brussels inaugural congress of this world congress of nationalist organizations, a fifth of the representatives came from the GMD.¹⁶

Meanwhile, another AIL had been established in Canton in 1925 by the GMD and the Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh. Including Vietnamese, Koreans, Indians, and Javanese, it

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- 10 Sun Zhongshan [Sun Yatsen], 'Sanminzhuyi: Minzuzhuyi (Three principles: nationalism)', lecture 4, 17 February 1924, in *Sun zhongshan quan ji (Collected works of Sun Zhongshan)*, 11 vols., Beijing: Zhong hua shuju, 1986, vol. 9, pp. 220–31, esp. p. 226; Wu Jianshu, 'Cong da Yazhou zhuyi zouxiang shijie datong zhuyi: lulun Sun Zhongshan de guoji zhuyi sixiang (From Pan-Asianism to world great harmony: Sun Yatsen's internationalism)', *Jindaishi yanjiu (Studies in Modern History)*, 3, 1997, pp. 183–98; Ishikawa Yoshihiro, *The formation of the Chinese Communist Party*, trans. Joshua Fogel, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012, ch. 2, pp. 131–2; John Fitzgerald, *Awakening China: politics, culture, and class in the Nationalist revolution*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 347; Xu Jilin, 'May Fourth: a patriotic movement of cosmopolitanism', *Sungkyun Journal of East Asian Studies*, 9, 1, 2009, pp. 29–62.
- 11 Hong Liu, 'Old linkages, new networks: the globalization of overseas Chinese voluntary associations and its implications', *China Quarterly*, 155, 1998, pp. 582–609.
- 12 Vera Tolz, *Russia's own orient: the politics of identity and oriental studies in the late imperial and Soviet periods*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 134–67; Joseph Esherick, 'How the Qing became China', in Joseph Esherick, Hasan Kayali, and Eric Van Young, eds., *Empire to nation: historical perspectives on the making of the modern world*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006, pp. 229–59.
- 13 Rebecca E. Karl, *Staging the world: Chinese nationalism at the turn of the twentieth century*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002, pp. 83–150.
- 14 Fred H. Harrington, 'The anti-imperialist movement in the United States, 1898–1900', *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 22, 2, 1935, pp. 211–30; Karl, *Staging the world*, pp. 113–14, 169–73.
- 15 Sun Yatsen, 'Dui shenhu shanghaiyisuo deng tuanti de yan shuo (The address to the Chamber of Commerce and other organizations of Kobe)', 28 November 1924, in *Collected works*, vol. 11, pp. 401–9, esp. p. 409.
- 16 Hans Piazza, 'Anti-imperialist League and the Chinese revolution', in Mechthild Leutner et al., eds., *The Chinese revolution in the 1920s: between triumph and disaster*, London: Routledge, 2002, pp. 166–76.

also provided a basis for the formation of the Vietnamese revolutionary Thanh Nien (Association of Vietnamese Revolutionary Youth).¹⁷ In 1927, the Union of the Oppressed Peoples of the East (*Dongfang Bei Yapo Minzu Lianhe Hui*) began to operate in Hankou and Shanghai, drawing membership from migrants of the same countries.¹⁷ Vietnamese sources suggest that the GMD established the Shanghai AIL in order to wrest leadership of Asian communists from the Comintern.¹⁸ Whether or not this is true, Hu Hanmin, chosen by Sun Yatsen himself as his successor in leadership of the GMD, certainly aspired to exploit the GMD as independent from the Chinese Communist Party (contrary to Comintern policy). By this means he hoped to convert the Comintern into a global organization of an ‘International of Nationalities’ (*Minzu Guoji*) with the GMD playing the leading role. As Hu put it,

In the days when *Zong li* [Sun Yatsen] was alive, I contend that he proposed to organize *Minzu Guoji* [International of Nationalities]¹⁹ so that we, the Guomintang, could lead the international national revolutionary movement (*lingdao guojide minzu geming yundong*) ourselves; when I went to Russia [1926] and suggested that the Guomintang become a Comintern member directly, I wanted the Guomintang to independently join the Comintern, and acquire [independent] status, and not be subjected to communist control and secret dealings. So the idea to organize *Minzu Guoji* and the idea to join the Comintern were consistent with each other and were in the same spirit. ... Frankly, my proposal to join the Comintern was because I had the hope of organizing *Minzu Guoji*.²⁰

Hu Hanmin’s goal for the establishment of the *Minzu Guoji* provides a glimpse into the long-term vision shared by both GMD and CCP leaders regarding China’s role in the Nanyang and in the larger international environment. It also sheds light on the conceptual origins of the CCP ambition to lead the world anti-colonial movement in the second half of the twentieth century.²¹ As early as 1928 a CCP programme prepared by the head of the Information-Statistical Institution of the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI) in Berlin, E. Varga, included the restitution of territories ‘seized by imperialists’, such as ‘Formosa, Indochina, Manchuria, etc.’²² Indeed, Ho Chi Minh decided to put his Indochinese party under Comintern jurisdiction in order to exclude the influence of the

17 Hoover Archives, Hankou dang’an (Hankou Collection), reel 64, file 7625.1, ‘Dongfang beiyapo lianhehui shang zhongzhui cheng (A letter from the Union of the Oppressed Peoples of the East to the Central Committee of the GMD)’, 23 July 1927.

18 Sophie Quinn-Judge, *Ho Chi Minh: the missing years, 1919–1941*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003, pp. 135, 167.

19 David P. Barrett translated this as ‘Nationalist International’ in ‘Marxism, the Communist Party, and the Soviet Union: three critiques by Hu Hanmin’, *Chinese Studies in History*, 14, 2, 1980–1, pp. 47–73.

20 Hu Hanmin, ‘*Minzu guoji yu disan guoji* (International of Nationalities and Communist International)’, in *Hu Hanmin shiji ziliao huji* (*The works of Hu Hanmin*), vol. 4, ed. Cuncui xueshe, Xianggang: Dadong tushu gongsi, 1980, pp. 1395–1401, esp. pp. 1400–1.

21 Alex Cook ‘Third world Maoism’, in Timothy Cheek, ed., *A critical introduction to Mao*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 288–312.

22 ‘Draft program of the CCP’, April 1928, in M. L. Titarenko and M. Leutner, eds., *VKP(b), Komintern i Kitai. Documenty. VKP(b), Komintern i sovetskoye dvizheniye v Kitae. 1931–1937. T.3 Chast 1 (All-Russia Communist Party (Bolshevik), Comintern and China. Documents. The Comintern and the soviet movement in China, 1931–1937)*, vol. 3, part 1, Moscow, 1999, pp. 364–71.

CCP's Singapore branch, which by 1930 was attempting to lead the communist organization in Annam (Central Vietnam) on behalf of the Comintern. Ho, however, did not hesitate at the MCP founding meeting to delegate the MCP to build independent parties in Siam, Borneo, and Sumatra. Six weeks prior to this meeting he had approached the Far Eastern Bureau (FEB) in Shanghai with some suggestions regarding future strategy. As a result, the Comintern decided to dispatch Ho to Singapore together with the Moscow-trained Chinese Fu Daqing, who had been involved in communist organization in Malaya since the mid 1920s.²³

At the same time, the GMD was developing its overseas organization. As the result of Comintern patronage and promotion of cooperation between the two parties, many CCP members had dual CCP and GMD membership and many GMD members were left-leaning. At the party's second national convention in Canton in 1926, delegates from Malaya, Java, Burma, Siam, and Indochina planned the establishment of an 'Overseas Chinese Communist Division' in order to unite the Chinese in the Nanyang and to carry out propaganda work among the 'small weak races' (that is, the indigenous people) with the goal of achieving their emancipation.²⁴ In the same year the CCP established its Nanyang branch. After the CCP defeat in China at the hands of the GMD in April 1927, many CCP members fled to the Nanyang, especially Malaya. The following year, the communist organization in Nanyang was renamed the Nanyang Provisional Committee of the CCP, and assumed responsibility for revolutionary activity in Indochina, Malaya, the Malayan archipelago, the Philippines, and Burma.²⁵

The ideological globalization that characterized the interwar years stimulated the expansion of the CCP's worldwide networks. As we have seen, from the late 1920s various AILs had been established in Shanghai, Canton, and Malaya as communist front organizations.²⁶ One example of these global linkages is seen in the case of a Stanford student, Shi Huang, who was dispatched to Cuba and Canada in 1929 by the Chinese faction of the Communist Party of the United States. His responsibility was to establish connections with local parties in order to build an 'Oriental branch of the All-America Anti-Imperialist League' of the Pacific Coast. After visiting Cuba, Shi went to Moscow to study and returned to China in 1930 to work as a translator for the Central Committee of the CCP.²⁷

23 Quinn-Judge, *Ho Chi Minh*, pp. 156–7; The Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History, (Rossiyskiy gosudarstvenniy Arhiv Sotsio-politicheskoi istorii), Moscow, (henceforth, RGASPI), 514/1/634/93–158, 'The minutes of the third representative conference of Nanyang', 22–23 April 1930, esp. pp. 134, 144–6; RGASPI, 534/4/549/25–7, anon., 'Malay', 18 November 1930. Ho's authorship is established based on the contents of the report. FEB letter to the ECCI, 3 March 1930, in Titarenko and Leutner, *Comintern and China*, vol. 3, part 2, pp. 822–3.

24 British Colonial Office records (henceforth, CO), 273-534, 'Monthly bulletin of political intelligence', January 1926, p. 1.

25 C. F. Yong, *The origins of Malayan communism*, Singapore: South Sea Society, 1997, pp. 62–9.

26 Khoo Kai Kym, 'The beginnings of political extremism in Malaya, 1915–1935', PhD Thesis, University of Malaya, 1973, p. 312; CO, 273-542, 'Kuo Min Tan and other societies in Malaya (continued), July–September 1928', 23 October 1928, pp. 9–10.

27 Josephine Fowler, *Japanese and Chinese immigrant activists organizing in American and international communist movements, 1919–1933*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007, pp. 145–146; Hu Xuanzhang, ed., *Ziqiang bu xi hou de zai wu – qinghua jingshen xun li (Self-discipline and social commitment are Tsinghua spirit)*, Beijing: Qinghua daxue chubanshe, 2010.

By 1930, the importance of the Chinese revolution as a harbinger of global changes imagined as the ‘world revolution’ originally advocated by the Comintern had become integral to the platforms of both the CCP and the GMD, and each organization was actively promoting its internationalization and exploiting its links with overseas Chinese communities. In the words of Hu Hanmin,

Our Chinese nation is truly so large that our national revolution must obtain international assistance and establish international contacts. Of course, the responsibilities that we, the Chinese people, ought to bear will be heavy ones indeed. To the smaller and weaker nations we should offer support in order to strengthen the forces of revolution and secure the foundation for revolution.²⁸

Li Lisan, the infamous architect of the disastrous CCP policy of urban uprisings in 1930, considered China to be the site of the most acute conflict of interests (*protivorechiye*) among the imperialist powers, where the prospect of a communist revolution seemed most likely. He therefore argued that ‘increasing international propaganda for the Chinese revolution among the international proletariat and regarding the defence of the Chinese revolution is the most serious task of the Chinese Communist Party’.²⁹ Li continued Hu’s earlier attempts to use the Comintern for the benefit of the ‘Chinese revolution’ and thus to promote Chinese nationalism. On 17 April 1930, around the time of the MCP’s establishment, he suggested setting up a new, more efficient FEB in Shanghai. In communications with the Eastern Secretariat of the Comintern in Moscow, he specifically demanded that organizational activities among foreign sailors, while carried out by ‘foreign comrades from England, France, Japan, India, Indochina’, should remain under CCP leadership.³⁰

For the Nanjing GMD government, the allegiance of Chinese communities in the Nanyang became vitally important with the onset of Japanese aggression in 1928, and this intensified the Nanjing GMD policy of indoctrinating overseas Chinese, promoting ‘colonization’ of Southeast Asia, which had long been seen in China as a Chinese sphere of influence.³¹ The idea of a Pan-Asian *Minzu Guoji*, an ‘International of the East’, or a ‘Three Principles’ International’ headed by China, advocated first by the left wing of the GMD, became a key element in the GMD policy of countering Japan’s southward expansion, and was promoted in overseas Chinese schools.³² By propagating Chinese nationalism among overseas Chinese communities in the Nanyang, the GMD aimed to ward off Japanese expansion in the region, in a manner that was reminiscent of the United States’ Monroe Doctrine. This policy prepared the ground for acceptance of the Comintern’s indigenization ideas, which fused the global and the local to create the ‘national’.

28 Hu, ‘International of Nationalities’.

29 ‘Pismo Li Lisanya Zhou Enlayu i Tsyui Tsyubo (Li Lisan’s letter to Zhou Enlai and Qu Qiubai)’, 17 April 1930, in Titarenko and Leutner, *Comintern and China*, vol. 3, part 2, pp. 865–8.

30 Ibid.

31 Liu Xuxuan and Shu Shicheng, *Zhonghua minzu tuozhi Nanyang shi (The history of the Chinese colonization of the Nanyang)*, Shanghai: Guoli bianyi guan, 1935.

32 Quinn-Judge, *Ho Chi Minh*, p. 135; So Wai Chor, *The Kuomintang Left in the National revolution, 1924–1931: the leftist alternative in republican China*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991, pp. 84–5, 92, 234; Li Yinghui, *Huaqiao zhengce yu haiwai minzuzhuyi (1912–1949) (The origin of overseas Chinese nationalism, 1912–1949)*, Taipei: Guoshiguan, 1997, pp. 506–7.

The Comintern and nationalism

The internationalism of the Comintern in the 1920s was one of many expressions of internationalism of global organizations in the interwar world. In 1923, the Indonesian Communist leader Tan Malaka spoke of the possibility of creating a Federation of Eastern Communists.³³ In 1924, an African nationalist, Lamine Senghor, together with Ho Chi Minh (who was involved in the French Communist Party's Union Intercoloniale), established the Ligue de Défense de la Race Nègre and attended the inaugural congress of the Anti-Imperialist League in Brussels in 1926. In the 1920s, the Comintern's support of the African cause, as seen in the goal of creating a belt of black nation-states within the United States and South Africa, and in local activist initiatives to establish black republics in Brazil and Cuba, channelled the African diasporic intellectuals' Pan-Africanism.³⁴ Comintern support of African states was comparable to the Soviet invention of new nations as soviet republics,³⁵ and the idea of the indigenous nation-state, like Wilson's self-determination slogans of a few years earlier, held out great appeal in the colonized world.³⁶

In Southeast Asia, in contrast to the situation in other parts of the world, the internationalism of the Comintern matched that of the Chinese nationalists in China. In British Malaya this export was facilitated by the existence of a Chinese immigrant community that needed to indigenize in order to survive.³⁷ Conversely, Victorio Codovilla, the European immigrant communist leader and founder of the South American Bureau of the Comintern in Buenos Aires in 1926, rejected the Comintern's suggestion of creating an Indian republic in the South American Andes based on the pre-Columbian Inca empire, and refused to embark upon an indigenous national project.³⁸ Meanwhile, unlike Japanese Pan-Asianism and Enver Paşa's Pan-Islamism – which, after a short-lived concord, clashed with Bolshevik internationalism in Central Asia, Manchuria, and Siberia³⁹ – Chinese and Comintern internationalism remained in harmony until after the Second World War.

By 1928, Comintern activities aiming to bring workers to power internationally had ended in defeat in Europe and Asia alike. In 1924 the Comintern attributed this failure to the stabilization of world capitalism, and the sixth congress in 1928 announced the beginning of a new Third Period of 'class against class' struggle. The Comintern no longer encouraged legal methods through parliaments and the press as a strategy for communist parties. Cooperation with moderate labour movements and social democrats was banned. Instead, the Comintern

33 RGASPI, 495/154/700/23–5, 'Guiding principles in the colonial question, by Tan Malaka', 1923.

34 Hayes B. Edwards, *The practice of diaspora: literature, translation, and the rise of black internationalism*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 29; Piazza, 'Anti-imperialist League'; Marc Gallicchio, *The African American encounter with Japan and China: black internationalism in Asia, 1895–1945*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000, p. 68; Marc Becker, 'Mariátegui, the Comintern, and the indigenous question in Latin America', *Science & Society*, 70, 4, October 2006, pp. 450–79.

35 Francine Hirsch, *Empire of nations: ethnographic knowledge and the making of the Soviet Union*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005.

36 Manela, *Wilsonian moment*.

37 Philip A. Kuhn, *Chinese among others: emigration in modern times*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008, pp. 45–52.

38 Becker, 'Mariátegui'.

39 Aydin, *Politics of anti-Westernism*, pp. 145–9.

started to establish communist parties in the colonies as a way of undermining European imperialism through their ‘weakest link’.⁴⁰ The struggle against fascism became the priority after the Nazis came to power in 1933. The seventh congress in 1935 announced yet another united front with social democrats and reformist labour unions and promoted the defence of political freedoms and parliamentary democracy.⁴¹

From the early 1920s, the Comintern cadres Tan Malaka and the Dutchman Hendricus Sneevliet (who in 1920 founded the first communist party in Asia, the Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI)) planned a communist network run from Shanghai to connect the Philippines, Indochina, the Dutch Indies, British India, and South China.⁴² Singapore was intended to be the platform to bring together the communist movements of China and Indonesia, including the overseas Chinese.⁴³ In 1923, with the rise of radicalism in Java, Moscow started to strategize with regard to the Malayan archipelago, located ‘near the most populated countries of the globe – China and India’.⁴⁴ In order to subvert British imperialism in China and Singapore, the Comintern planned to establish an ‘organization of transport workers’ linking South China, the Malayan archipelago, Indochina, and Siam in order to stimulate a ‘national revolutionary movement’. Propaganda in native languages was to be launched from some port in the Pacific. Tan Malaka was dispatched to carry out that programme and to set up cells in Java, Singapore, Bangkok, and Hong Kong, as well as Canton and Shanghai, in an effort to establish connections with Vladivostok (where the Comintern had a base) and Moscow. This, it was anticipated, would create a communication channel that would supply information to Moscow, on the basis of which ‘the Eastern secretariat could provide the guiding line’.⁴⁵ Tan Malaka created the short-lived Canton Bureau (June 1924) to coordinate this organization.⁴⁶ In Singapore, however, he found that Chinese and Indians were more responsive to communist ideas than were the local Indonesian and Malay communities.⁴⁷ In response to his request, the experienced organizer Fu Daqing and a Hainanese labour organizer were dispatched to Singapore.⁴⁸ During a visit in

40 *Shestoi kongress Kominterna, Stenograficheskiy otchet. Vyp. 4, Revoliutsionniye dvizheniye v kolonialnykh i polukolonial'nykh stranakh* (The sixth Comintern congress, stenographical report. Vol. 4: revolutionary movement in colonial and semi-colonial countries), Moscow and Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe izdatelstvo, 1929, p. 24.

41 Alexander Vatlin and Stephen A. Smith, ‘The Comintern’, in Stephen A. Smith, ed., *The Oxford handbook of the history of communism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 187–94.

42 ‘Report of Comrade H. Maring to the Executive’, 11 July 1922, in Tony Saich, *The origins of the first United Front in China: the role of Sneevliet (alias Maring)*, Leiden: Brill, 1991, pp. 305–23.

43 RGASPI, 534/4/106/1–2, Hassan [Tan Malaka], Letter, 7 July 1924.

44 Takashi Shiraishi, *An age in motion: popular radicalism in Java, 1912–1926*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990; RGASPI, 495/214/700/32–6, Popov, ‘Gollandskaya India (Dutch Indies)’, 17 December 1923.

45 RGASPI, 495/154/700/8, 8ob., Grigory Voitinsky (Head of the Eastern Secretariat), ‘Spravka (A Note)’, 1923.

46 Tan Malaka only cited *Encyclopaedie van Nederlandsch-Indië*, 2nd edn, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1917–39, without providing his own account of the events: see Tan Malaka, *From jail to jail*, trans. and introduced by Helen Jarvis, Athens, OH: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1991, vol. 1, pp. 103–6, 109–15, 245 n. 18.

47 Cheah Boon Kheng, *From PKI to the Comintern, 1924–1941: the apprenticeship of the Malayan Communist Party: selected documents and discussion*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992, p. 9.

48 RGASPI, 534/4/106/9, Tan Malaka’s letters, 7 July and 16 September 1924; Gene Z. Hanrahan, *The communist struggle in Malaya*, New York: Institute of Pacific Relations, 1954, p. 9; CO, 273–572, *Monthly Review of Chinese Affairs* (henceforth, *MRC*), December 1931, p. 6.

1925 the PKI leader Alimin Prawirodirdjo (who did not speak Chinese), was reportedly able to recruit only Chinese and Indian labourers, although the number of Indonesian communists did increase when many fled to Singapore following the suppression of the 1926–27 PKI uprising.⁴⁹

The plan to infiltrate Southeast Asia through the indigenization of the Comintern's message, using local agents and propaganda in native languages, was central to the CCP's expansion into the Nanyang. By 1928, the Comintern had also begun to push the unwilling CCP to establish connections with Java in order to re-establish the PKI.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, Chinese communists in Singapore and Malaya hoped that the expansion of their organizational network would be aided by the establishment of the MCP.⁵¹ The success of new initiatives seemed to be assured because by the mid 1930s the Comintern had strengthened pre-existing Chinese maritime networks so that they were now dominated by communists. The MCP was envisaged as the connecting hub responsible for developing a region-wide communist network in Southeast Asia.

Malaya after 1930: global and local

The history of the Chinese words for 'assimilation into local society' (*tonghua*) and 'allegiance to China' (*guihua*) provides an insight into the MCP's understanding of how non-Chinese peoples could be involved in the party. As China expanded territorially before the twentieth century, these terms had come to denote the assimilation of non-Han peoples in the borderlands (*tonghua*) and foreigners (*guihua*) into Chinese culture; however, there was no word for the reverse process. Although Chinese communities in the Nanyang had been characterized by social adaptation (and a certain loss of their 'Chineseness'), increased migration in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had encouraged a process of re-sinicization by the Chinese state that only encountered barriers when Chinese migration was restricted after 1929.⁵² The Nanjing GMD government's vocabulary of assimilation reflected its acknowledgment of the 'foreignness' of overseas Chinese who were being re-sinicized (*guihua*) to prevent their assimilation into the local culture (*tonghua*).⁵³

Closer links with China, however, also led to tensions between descendants of earlier Chinese migrants who had married local women and had developed much greater connections with local society. In the face of increased Malay activism, some locally born Chinese leaders, such as the English-educated Tan Cheng Lock, even began to speak of the 'Malayan spirit and consciousness' (my emphasis).⁵⁴ On the other hand, for other Chinese,

49 Ruth Thomas McVey, *The rise of Indonesian communism*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1965, p. 231; RGASPI, 495/214/3/123–4, Santos [Alimin], 'Brief description of my activities in the past', 10 January 1939; RGASPI, 495/214/3/161–5, Santos [Alimin], untitled.

50 RGASPI, 495/62/2/1–2, ECCI letter to the FEB, 23 October 1930.

51 RGASPI, 495/62/3/1–10, 'Resolutions adopted at the third congress of Malaya Party', 22–23 April 1930.

52 Zhao Gang, *The Qing opening to the ocean: Chinese maritime policies, 1684–1757*, Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013, pp. 4–5, 188–90; Kuhn, *Chinese among others*, pp. 250–82.

53 Wang Gungwu, 'Tonghua, guihua, and history of the overseas Chinese', in Ng Lun Ngai-ha and Chang Chak Yan, eds., *Overseas Chinese in Asia between the two world wars*, Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1989, pp. 11–23.

54 Tan Cheng Lock, 'Extract from Mr. Tan Cheng Lock's speech at the meeting of the legislative council held on 1st November 1926', in *Malayan problems from the Chinese point of view*, Singapore: Tannaco, 1947, pp. 88–93, esp. p. 90.

the restrictions on Chinese immigration as a result of the Depression and the dramatic increase of Malaya's locally born Chinese population from 20.9% in 1921 to 29.9% in 1931 increased anxiety about the 'Chineseness' of locally born Chinese.⁵⁵ While aspiring to build a Nanyang overseas Chinese culture, Chinese intellectuals in Malaya resisted any idea that they should become 'indigenous'. Their links with China were strong, and many teachers from Chinese-language schools, writers for Chinese-language newspapers, and 'intellectuals' prominent in the MCP were also GMD members.⁵⁶

One example was Xu Jie, appointed by the Central Committee of the GMD as an editor of *Peoples' Concern* (*Yiqun Bao*) in Kuala Lumpur in 1928–29. Xu Jie maintained connections with local communists, who shared 'news' with him. At the same time he was involved in local literary movements and with local writers promoted the concept of Malayan Chinese literature (*mahua wenxue*) and the idea of Nanyang 'local colour' (*Nanyang secai*). This was a response to the condescending attitude to the local 'imitation' of Chinese culture expressed by the first-generation of educated migrant Chinese.⁵⁷ Xu's idea that young locally born Chinese would become leaders of the liberation of the oppressed people of the Nanyang if they knew the Chinese language was an expression of the GMD's global ambitions, as well as the goal of cultivating an identification with China among overseas Chinese. In one of his short stories, Xu wrote:

At the bookstore I saw that youngster, Ai Lian. ... He had a touch of melancholy. I thought, this is that specific expression that the oppressed peoples of the colonies have. In a flash, I also recalled the eyes of that [Indian] man, and the yellow scraggy eyes of that Malay, and also recalled those two flashing bayonets. Ai Lian furtively read Chinese books; he especially liked to read books on social sciences. ... At that time, our eyes met. Again, like last time on the road, he smiled slightly at me. I also nodded but did not say a word. 'You, promising youth, when you train yourself, strengthen yourself, you will become the centre of the Nanyang revolution!'⁵⁸

Xu's point that the hope of the Nanyang revolution would be young, locally born Chinese who still maintained a 'Chinese' identity provides a rare insight into the intersection of the discourses of the Comintern, Malayan Chinese immigrant intellectuals, the GMD, the CCP, and the British Malayan English-language public sphere. It demonstrates the conjuncture of changes in conceptual and social aspects of the discursive community of Chinese revolutionaries. The common goal of all three – the Comintern, the Chinese revolutionary parties (the CCP and the GMD), and local left-leaning intellectuals – was to

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- 55 K. J. Ratnam, *Communalism and the political process in Malaya*, Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1965, p. 9; Wang Gungwu, 'The limits of Nanyang Chinese nationalism, 1912–1937', in C. D. Cowan and O. W. Wolters, eds., *Southeast Asian history and historiography*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1976, pp. 405–23.
- 56 C. F. Yong, 'An overview of the Malayan communist movement to 1942', in Chin and Hack, *Dialogues*, pp. 247–51; Yoji Akashi, 'The Nanyang Chinese anti-Japanese and boycott movement, 1908–1928: a study of Nanyang Chinese nationalism', *Journal of the South Seas Society*, 23, 1968, p. 77.
- 57 He Pingping, *Xu Jie koushu (Oral history of Xu Jie)*, Shanghai: Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe, 1997, pp. 149–51, 171–217; David Kenley, *New culture in a new world: the May Fourth movement and the Chinese diaspora in Singapore (1919–1932)*, New York: Routledge, 2003, pp. 157–76, 180–1 n. 50.
- 58 Xu Jie, 'Liangge qingnian (Two youths)', in *Yezi yu liulian: yiming Nanyang manji (Coconut and Durian: Nanyang Travel Notes)*, Shijia zhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 1994, pp. 16–27, esp. p. 27.

attract locally born Chinese.⁵⁹ The Comintern wanted them to join the MCP because they believed that recent migrants were insufficiently knowledgeable about local conditions and thus of little use as sources of information.⁶⁰ By contrast, Xu Jie wanted to include the locally born Chinese in the Nanyang revolution so that they could fulfil the mission of emancipating ‘weak nations’ through their Chinese identity and Chinese-language facility, which ensured that they were not ‘slaves’ who spoke Malay and English, the language of the colonial regime. The Communist Youth League (CYL) had similar concerns.⁶¹ In fact, the two locally born Chinese in Kuala Lumpur who figured in Xu’s short story were students of a Methodist English school and were recruited by the local CYL after they published pieces in *Peoples’ Concern*.⁶² To a considerable extent, the growth of nationalist feeling among the overseas Chinese was heavily dependent on expatriate intellectuals, agents of GMD policy such as Xu, who promoted the Nanjing government’s message of Chinese nationalism in local Chinese schools.⁶³ Like the Chinese politicians who toured the Nanyang described by Prasenjit Duara, the GMD thus ‘succeeded in cultivating a vague, contextual, and ambivalent yearning for a Chineseness that reminds us of the “national” in transnational’.⁶⁴

MCP establishment, 1930

An independent Nanyang party was formed in 1930 through the initiative of the Nanyang Provisional Committee of the CCP based in Singapore, where the communist organization became the core of the newly established MCP.⁶⁵ The policy of creating national parties and the idea of fostering world revolution based on local conditions (that is, indigenization), expressed in a 1930 Comintern letter,⁶⁶ coincided with several factors – the indigenization trend in the CCP, a growing tendency for many Malayan Chinese to see advantages in identifying with Malaya, a sense of their own identity among Chinese intellectuals, and the desire for autonomy among local Communist organizations.

In the MCP story, discourse and words (and their varying but related concepts) became key variables. Since 1927 the efforts of Chinese political organizations to embed themselves in their host environments had been evident in the left-wing GMD and in the CCP Nanyang Provisional Committee, as both called for local non-Chinese in British Malaya to be involved

59 RGASPI, 495/62/12/3, 3ob., 4, ‘To the Malayan comrades’, Letter from the FEB to the MCP, 17 December 1930.

60 RGASPI, 495/154/372/26–40, ‘Vystupleniye Raitera o polozhenii Spetssectora KUTV na 7 fevr. 1929 goda na zasedanii kollegii vostochnogo sekretariata (Raiter’s address about the situation in the special sector of KUTV on 7 February 1929 at the meeting of the Collegiate of the Eastern Secretariat)’.

61 RGASPI, 533/10/1818/5, ‘Report from Nanyang’; Xu, ‘Two youths’.

62 He, *Xu Jie*, pp. 173–5.

63 Wang Gungwu, ‘The limits’, pp. 417–19.

64 Prasenjit Duara, ‘Transnationalism and the predicament of sovereignty: China, 1900–1945’, *American Historical Review*, 102, 4, October 1997, pp. 1030–51, esp. p. 1043.

65 RGASPI 495/62/2/1–2, Letter of the ECCI to the FEB, 23 October 1930; Hanrahan, *Communist struggle*, pp. 38–9.

66 ‘To the Malayan comrades’.

in a united movement for liberation from colonial oppression.⁶⁷ During the commemorative demonstration of the anniversary of Sun Yatsen's death, known as the Kreta Ayer incident, which resulted in clashes with the police, the GMD issued pamphlets promoting the common interests of overseas Chinese and the 'weak nationals' of the Nanyang in their goal to achieve their self-determination and to end discrimination against the Chinese.⁶⁸

The CCP aim of involving non-Chinese in its organization is reflected in the writings of Li Lisan, who by 1928 was the head of the Guangdong Provincial Committee and the de facto CCP leader. He had experience working in France among Chinese workers, and his charismatic leadership and ability to adapt to different local cultural contexts had resulted in the CCP's first successful labour mobilization in 1922 in the Anyuan coal mines.⁶⁹ Li Lisan criticized the Nanyang communists in his diary entry for 1 January 1929, for 'making a Chinese revolution'. We know from MCP documents that 'Chinese revolution' referred specifically to anti-Japanese propaganda and boycotts, to the campaign for democratic freedoms and improved labour conditions, and to protests against British attempts to control Chinese education in Malaya.⁷⁰ Criticizing the GMD policy of promoting 'patriotism' in Chinese communities, Li instead advocated a 'Nanyang revolution' that would mark the 'beginning of the national movement'.⁷¹ The same words were included in a draft resolution of the Central Committee of the CCP on 'the revolutionary movements and policies of our party in the Nanyang' sent to the Nanyang Provisional Committee. In other words, the policy of developing a Chinese revolution and a Nanyang communist party that would only include Chinese could be traced to a lack of indigenization. In Li's view, this shortcoming could be attributed to the fact that the policies developed in China were applied in the Nanyang without considering the local context, which included the Nanyang's colonial status, the 'many nationalities' present, and a more developed industry.⁷²

Li's directive placed responsibility for Nanyang emancipation on the Chinese and presented a separate colonial liberation of the Chinese and the locals as an impossibility. Written in English, this letter makes his opinion clear:

We should further impress these slogans and conception deeply upon the minds of the Chinese to remove their wrong ideas as to look down on other nations [i.e. ethnic groups] and then the real unity can be obtained. ... But it is known that Chinese there did oppress Malay people, because the latter are poor and backward in civilisation. So it is the fundamental task of our party to tighten the relationship of all the oppressed

67 Yong, *Origins*, pp. 78, 160; 'Resolution', RGASPI 495/62/1/23.

68 CO, 273–538, 'Message to the overseas Chinese in respect of the second anniversary of the death of Sun Chung San [Sun Yatsen]'.

69 Guixiang Ren, Hongying Zhao, and Mao Shi, eds., *Hua qiao huqren yu guogong guanxi (Chinese overseas and the CCP–GMD relations)*, Wuhan: Wuhan chubanshe, 1999, p. 80; Elizabeth J. Perry, *Anyuan: mining China's revolutionary tradition*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012, pp. 85–6, 148.

70 RGASPI, 495/62/1/1–17, 'V tsentral'nyi komitet (To the Central Committee)', A report by the Nanyang Provisional Committee (*vremennyi komitet malayskogo arhipelaga*) to the Central Committee of the CCP, 19 July and 22 August 1928.

71 Zhonggong zhongyang dangshi yanjiu shi di yi yanjiubu bian, ed., *Li Lisan baimian dancheng jinianji (100th anniversary of Li Lisan: collected writings)*, Beijing: Zhonggongdangshi chubanshe, 1999, p. 68–9.

72 RGASPI, 514/1/532/8–13, 'A letter from the Central Committee of the CCP to Nanyang Provisional Committee', 22 January 1929, pp. 8–9, 13.

nations and to make the Malay people understand that in order to release them from the yoke of the imperialists, the unity of the oppressed is absolutely necessary. If the Chinese want to claim for emancipation, it is possible only when all the oppressed nations are released. It is absolutely impossible to release any single nation separately. ... Thus, the principle task of our party is first of all to make all the oppressed unite and strive for the goal of the national emancipation.⁷³

The directive echoes two central points that were discussed at the Comintern congress in Moscow: the Chinese revolution as a frame of reference and the need for each party's policy to be based on local conditions.⁷⁴ Unwilling to assume full responsibility, the CCP sent the draft directive to the Comintern for approval.⁷⁵

Li's suggestions undoubtedly reflected what was happening in the Comintern. In 1928 he participated in the sixth congress of the CCP (18 June–11 July) and in the sixth congress of the Comintern (17 July–1 September) in Moscow. Recalled to Moscow from China in 1931 by the Comintern because of his policy of organizing uprisings that almost ruined the CCP organization, he participated in drafting the Comintern letter to the MCP.⁷⁶ However, according to the available documentary evidence, it was the CCP leadership that first suggested the organization of a Nanyang party under Comintern leadership: 'The party in the Nanyang should make preparations to establish an independent party of the Nanyang, directly instructed by the Third International.' Moreover,

suggestions should be submitted to the Third International to call their attention to the work of the Nanyang, because it would occupy a very important position during the looming World War [that, in Comintern analysis, would resolve the contradictions between imperialist powers which still persisted after the First World War], and to ask them to convene a meeting of the parties of various nations to discuss the work of the Nanyang.⁷⁷

If we consider that in Malaya Xu Jie was publishing his stories at the same time (January 1929)⁷⁸ and that they echo Li's directive and the reports of Nanyang communists to the CCP and the Comintern, it is possible that Li Lisan's idea of a Nanyang revolution originated with Nanyang Chinese intellectuals. On the other hand, far from expressing an intention to undermine the CCP's position in Southeast Asia,⁷⁹ in 1928 the Comintern had also

73 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

74 *Stenograficheskiy otchet VI kongressa Kominterni (Stenographic report of the 6th congress of the Comintern)*, Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoye izdatelstvo, 1929, issue 5, p. 143, issue 4, p. 414.

75 'A letter from the Central Committee', p. 13.

76 RGASPI, 495/62/18/42–53, Letter to the MCP from the Eastern Secretariat of the Comintern, 14 April 1931, esp. p. 42.

77 'A letter from the Central Committee', p. 10.

78 He, *Xu Jie*, pp. 170–7.

79 Cheah, *From PKI to the Comintern*; Yong, *Origins*, pp. 131–4; René H. Onraet, *Singapore: a police background*, London: Dorothy Crisp, 1947, p. 109; Fujio Hara, 'Dier ci shijie dazhan qiande malaiya gongchandang (The MCP before the Second World War)', *Nanyang ziliao yicong (Southeast Asian Studies)*, 4, 2005, pp. 56–70; Quinn-Judge, *Ho Chi Minh*, p. 168. One exception to this view is Charles McLane, *Soviet strategies in Southeast Asia*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966, pp. 202–3.

considered establishing a CCP ‘overseas centre’, ‘near China (Singapore, Manila, etc.)’, where Central Committee members could carry out their work unrecognized, in contrast to the situation in Shanghai where they were known to the now hostile GMD.⁸⁰

The Comintern’s recommendations and Li’s directive to stop focusing on the Chinese revolution both aimed to promote indigenization of the revolution, that is, a ‘united front’ with non-Chinese.⁸¹ After the establishment of the MCP, the Comintern echoed Li in criticizing the MCP for ‘mechanistically grafting the methods and slogans of the Chinese movement in Malaya’.⁸² These criticisms resonated with a growing sense among local Chinese communists that they should work towards greater identification with Malaya and establish an independent Malayan faction of the Chinese Communist Party, separate from the GMD.

Though delayed for over a year until 22–23 April 1930 (because of arrests of important individuals), the founding conference of the MCP again criticized the party for being a ‘narrow national [ethnic Chinese] movement’ and lamented the lack of special instructions for Malaya from the Central Committee of the CCP. The party had 1,130 party members (including five Malays) and over 4,250 members of the communist-influenced ‘red’ trade unions. The conference itself included only one Malay and one representative from the Netherlands East Indies.⁸³ However, the term ‘Malay’ may be deceptive: by 1 April 1930, of six ‘Malays’ arrested because of their association with the Chinese communists, five (Ahmed Baiki bin Suile, Ali Majid, Jamal Ud Din, Emat alias Abdul Hamid, and Haji Mohamed bin Hashim) came from Sumatra, Sulawesi, and Java, and it is likely that the sixth, Salleh Bin Sapi, did as well.⁸⁴

Despite its alleged goals, the MCP was still said to be ‘exclusively Chinese’ (apart from one Indian) and appeared to have ‘no plan to involve non-Chinese other than vulgar conversation and politeness’, because of difficulties with their different ‘language and custom’.⁸⁵ The discrepancy in the documents sent to the Comintern, which report an MCP membership of 10% ‘Malaysians and Indians’, may have been because the Central Committee in Singapore relied on reports from local cells, which were often intercepted and therefore irregular. Some MCP envoys claimed that they themselves did not have sufficient knowledge of party membership to make accurate reports.⁸⁶ Furthermore, when the Central

80 ‘Pismo A.E. Albrehta I.A. Pyatnitskomu (The letter of A. E. Albreht to I. A. Pyatnitskiy)’, 1 May 1928, in Titarenko and Leutner, *Comintern and China*, vol. 3, part 1, pp. 381–4.

81 ‘To the Malayan comrades’.

82 RGASPI, 495/62/2/1–2, Letter of the ECCI to the FEB, 23 October 1930.

83 RGASPI, 514/1/634/93–158, ‘Minutes of the third representative conference’, pp. 109, 130, 136–7; RGASPI, 514/1/634/86–92, ‘Protokol der 3. Delegierten Konferenz von Nanyang (Malayische Jureln)’; RGASPI, 495/62/3/1–10, ‘Resolutions adopted at the third congress’.

84 ‘A report showing the connection between Chinese and non-Chinese concerned in communist activities in Malaya’, 1 April 1930, CO273/561/72074, cited in Cheah, *From PKI to the Comintern*, pp. 53–6.

85 RGASPI, 534/4/549/25–7, Ho Chih Minh’s report, 18 November 1930; RGASPI, 495/62/11/27–9, ‘Report from Malay’, 2 January 1931; RGASPI, 495/62/11/1–4, ‘To the CC of the Chinese party and Comintern’ (undated report); RGASPI, 495/62/7/2–4, ‘Informatsiya o Malaiskih Shtatah (Information about Malay states)’, 3 October 1930.

86 ‘Information about Malay states’, p. 3; RGASPI, 495/62/6/17–21, Wang Yung Hai, ‘To the Far Eastern Bureau’.

Table 1. Numbers of total members and non-Chinese members of the MCP and the red labour unions, 1930–1.

	MCP	Red labour unions
1930	Indians: 5 Malays: 2 members and 1 candidate, possibly including a former PKI member Subajio; 1 Central Committee member and 5 candidates	Indians and Malays: 300 (at least 30 Malays and 220 Indians)
March 1931	Total members: 1220	Indians: 350 Malays: 30 Javanese: 72 Total members: 5830
Sept. 1931		Indians and Malays: 1220 Total members: 8175
Dec. 1931	Indians: 28 Malays: 17 Javanese: 1	Indians: 180 Malays: at least 700 In Singapore: 10% Malays, Tamils; 9 Javanese and 57 Indians 'under influence'

Sources: RGASPI, 495/62/7/9–8, undated report, probably 1931; RGASPI, 495/154/752/37–8, 'Declaration of Subajio', 21 June 1930; RGASPI, 495/62/6/5–7, Ho Chih Minh, letter to the Comintern, November/December 1930; RGASPI, 495/62/11/27–9, 'Report from Malay', 2 January 1931; RGASPI, 495/62/9/1–4, Von Mei-Hon [Huang Muhan], 'Rabocheye dvizheniye v malayskih federativnyh shtatah (Worker movement in the Federated Malay States)', 5 March 1931; CO, 273-572, 'A report from 12 September 1931 from Malaya about labour union to CC MCP', MRCA, December 1931, p. 44; CO, 273-572, MRCA, December 1931, p. 41. Because of secrecy, MCP communications rarely mention names.

Committee and other local organizations sent envoys to Shanghai in 1930 as MCP representatives, in hopes of gaining Comintern funding and recognition of autonomy,⁸⁷ there was a clear benefit to showing growing recruitment of non-Chinese, which had been a condition stipulated by the Comintern. It is evident, however, that these estimates were exaggerated, since other sources show no improvement (see Table 1).

The MCP's difficulties in engaging Malays are not surprising, given typically condescending attitudes that perpetuated European nineteenth-century stereotypes.⁸⁸ An MCP report stated: 'All aborigines are lazy. Though they have fertile land, they do not persevere to till it but spend their fatal time in sexual abuses, idleness and superstition.'⁸⁹ Although Ho Chi Minh reprimanded the Chinese communists for not learning Malay, Indonesian Comintern agents were also unsuccessful in recruiting Malays into the MCP. Similarly, a group of Chinese sent by the Nanyang Party to Indonesia in 1930 failed to generate links to the PKI. Fearing arrest in Singapore, the PKI leader Alimin was dispatched to Shanghai in 1931, where he worked among Malay and Javanese seamen until arrests decimated the local Comintern bureau in June of that year. It was hoped that Tan Malaka, whom the Comintern discovered in Shanghai where he had been in hiding since 1927, would

87 RGASPI, 495/62/2/6–7, FEB's letter to Ducroux, 20 May 1931.

88 Anthony Milner, *The invention of politics in colonial Malaya: contesting nationalism and the expansion of public sphere*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, ch. 3, esp. p. 64.

89 RGASPI, 495/62/11/1–4, 'To the CC of the Chinese party and Comintern', p. 2.

be an effective organizer, but he was arrested en route in Hong Kong.⁹⁰ In Malaya itself the MCP had no connection with the short-lived *Belia Malaya* (Young Malaya, 1930–31), established by Malay student teachers at Sultan Idris Training College inspired by the idea of unity with Indonesia in a greater *Malaysia Raya*, including Ibrahim Yaacob.⁹¹ This apparent gap in communication is significant, given that in 1937 Yaacob and his Young Malay Union (Kesatuan Melayu Muda, KMM) were credited with creating the discourse of an inclusive multi-ethnic Malayan nation.⁹²

The MCP's Malayan nation (post-1930)

Like the CCP, the newborn MCP emerged as a text-focused party that spent much time producing, interpreting, and disseminating written material, and was aptly described by the British as a 'paper movement'. During October and November 1931, for example, police in Singapore seized a total of 4,716 copies of various documents.⁹³ MCP efforts to become 'international' were based on Comintern texts as a means of communication and of bonding with non-Chinese. In this multi-lingual community there was a clear slippage in meanings between different language communities. The mechanism for this slippage was twofold – conceptual and social – as speakers of different languages interpreted authoritative texts or generated a pragmatic definition of some keywords, using the conceptual training available to them.⁹⁴ Shifts in the meaning of one particular keyword, *minzu*, came in conjunction with the changed social experience of Chinese migrant identification with Malaya and created the basis for the MCP's formulation of its idea of Malayan nationalism. A comparable ambiguity of the Malay term *bangsa* did not produce the discourse of a multi-ethnic Malayan nation, since for many Malays this invoked the threat of immigrant domination.⁹⁵

The genealogy of the word *minzu*, used to connote the Comintern concept of 'national', can be traced to Sun Yatsen's use of both *minzu* and *guojia* (country) as translations of the English word 'nation' when referring to China. Both the GMD and the CCP used *minzu* in

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- 90 'RGASPI, 514/1/634/93–158, 'Minutes of the third representative conference', pp. 144–6; RGASPI 495/214/752/40–1, Alimin, Letters of 23 April and 29 September 1930; 86; Santos, 'Brief description'; RGASPI, 495/214/3/161–5, Santos, untitled; RGASPI, 495/214/3/35–7, Santos, 'Svedeniya o Malake (Information about Malaka)', 7 June 1939; RGASPI, 495/214/752/53–76, Musso, 'Situatsiya v Indonesii posle vosstaniya (The situation in Indonesia after the uprising)', 22 September 1930.
- 91 William Roff, *The origins of Malay nationalism*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967, pp. 224–5, 255.
- 92 Tan Liok Ee, 'The rhetoric of *bangsa* and *minzu*: community and nation in tension, the Malay Peninsula, 1900–1955', Monash University, working paper 52, Clayton, Australia: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, 1988.
- 93 Hans J. van de Ven, 'The emergence of the text-centered party', in Tony Saich and Hans J. Van de Ven, eds., *New perspectives on the Chinese communist revolution*, Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1995, pp. 5–32; Hanrahan, *Communist struggle*, p. 9; CO, 273-572, MRCA, December 1931, pp. 31–2, 55; CO, 273-572, MRCA, October 1931, pp. 44–5.
- 94 I am borrowing here from Reinhart Koselleck, 'Begriffsgeschichte and social history', in *Futures past: on the semantics of historical time*, Cambridge, MA: Michigan Institute of Technology, 1985, pp. 73–91.
- 95 Hiroyuki Yamamoto, Anthony Milner, Midori Kawashima, and Kazuhiko Arai, eds., *Bangsa and umma: development of people-grouping concepts in Islamized Southeast Asia*, Japan: Kyoto University Press, 2011; Anthony Reid, 'Melayu as a source of diverse modern identities', in Timothy Barnard, ed., *Contesting Malayness: Malay identity across boundaries*, Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2004, pp. 1–24.

this dual meaning as ‘nation’ as well as ‘nationality’. Multiple meanings of *minzu* as ‘ethnic’, ‘people’, ‘nation’, and ‘nationality’ are reflected in a CCP statement from 1929: ‘The national problem of the Nanyang – the nations [*minzu*] in the Nanyang are very complex.’⁹⁶ These multiple meanings resulted in a semantic slippage when the Comintern embarked on establishing a Malayan ‘national’ party in a country that only existed in relation to the British colonial concept of ‘Malaya’, meaning the Malay Peninsula. Point seventeen of the twenty-one requirements for official acceptance as a Comintern section stated that an applicant party should be named a ‘party of a country’ (*partiya etoi strany*).⁹⁷ By adding the attribute ‘Malayan’ to ‘nation’ (*minzu*), the Comintern created the concept of a ‘Malayan nation’ that was territorially based on British Malaya. This provided the tool that transformed the GMD’s idea of *minzu* into a discourse of ‘*minzu* as communities within a [Malaysian] nation’ that was promoted by various Chinese associations in Malaya/Malaysia in the 1950s.⁹⁸

The Chinese communists in the Nanyang, however, imagined another ‘national’ Malayan party, a federation of communist parties organized along ethnic lines. The CCP understood the word *minzu* to mean ‘people’, probably because the communist cells in mainland Southeast Asia were organized according to ethnicity, differentiating, for instance, Chinese from Vietnamese.⁹⁹ Since 1929 the CCP had intended to unify Chinese ethnic cells across the Nanyang into one party.¹⁰⁰ In 1930, to solve the problem of the party’s concentration on Chinese communities, the MCP members-to-be suggested creating ‘a nucleus among each people [i.e. ethnic community], in order to establish an independent party of each people’.¹⁰¹ In other words, the Nanyang communists interpreted the Comintern’s idea of a ‘national’ party principle as one that would be based on an ‘ethnic group’.

The MCP’s political resolution stated the following:

In view of the mistake that the system of Malay party belongs to Chinese party, some members insist to organise an [*sic*] unity party embracing all people in Malaya. This organisational line is also contradictory to the organisational principle of international party, for the unit of organisation is people. Each native people should organise a national party. ... To organise an unity party consisting of various peoples is incorrect.¹⁰²

This statement was incompatible with the Comintern’s policy of having one communist party per country. Over this paragraph, a Comintern cadre wrote: *Sovershenno neverno* (‘Absolutely wrong’). Elsewhere, the FEB noted that ‘The idea of creating several Communist parties based on the [different] nationalities in Malaya must be energetically combated’; in ‘the Malayan state’ there should be only one party, which would include

96 Tan, ‘Rhetoric of *bangsa* and *minzu*’, pp. 27–8; ‘A letter from the Central Committee’, p. 10.

97 ‘21 usloviye priyema v Komintern (21 conditions of acceptance into the Comintern)’, 2nd edn, introduction by Pyatnitskiy, Izdatelstvo TsK VKP(b), 1934.

98 Tan, ‘Rhetoric of *bangsa* and *minzu*’, p. 34.

99 Christopher E. Goscha, *Thailand and the Southeast Asian networks of the Vietnamese revolution, 1885–1954*, London: Curzon Press, 1999.

100 ‘A letter from the Central Committee’, p. 12.

101 RGASPI, 495/62/3/1–10, ‘Resolutions adopted at the third congress’, p. 8.

102 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

‘workers of all nationalities’.¹⁰³ Later in 1930 the MCP changed its idea of a ‘national party’ in accordance with the Comintern idea of an ethnically inclusive party.

In CCP documents from 1928–29, the term ‘Malaya’ was not used, and there was thus no correlation with ‘national’.¹⁰⁴ However, starting with the MCP’s founding conference minutes, the terms ‘Malaya party’ and ‘Nanyang party’ were used interchangeably and had the meaning of ‘national party’. The goal of the MCP revolution was to achieve ‘a united front of the oppressed peoples’ and to organize ‘the Democratic Republic by free union among the various people of Nanyang’, which in the same paragraph was termed ‘Democratic Republics of the Malay States’.¹⁰⁵ The idea of a soviet federation made sense in Malaya – and in the Nanyang – with its multiple *minzu*, which, for the Comintern, translated into the Russian ‘nationality’ (*natsionalnosty*).¹⁰⁶ Following the Comintern’s directives, the MCP now conceived of the Malayan ‘nation’ as encompassing all Malayan ethnic groups in the fashion of the multi-ethnic Soviet federation. Thus, the Comintern gave Chinese communists in the Nanyang the discursive tools to imagine Malaya (consisting at the time of several sultanates under British dominion) as a nation-state.

As a result of different understandings of the word *minzu* by the CCP and the Comintern, a communist organization that was built according to ‘people’ became the basis of a ‘country-wide’ communist party of a non-existent country. With the equation of the ‘ethnic’ Chinese party and the ‘national Malayan’ party, the Chinese communists were to lead Malaya’s oppressed peoples to colonial liberation and nationhood on behalf of the Malayan ‘nation’ and the Malayan revolution. It was this slippage that made Malaya a territorialized ‘nation’ and a ‘country’ in MCP discourse, since, like the Comintern, the MCP used ‘national’ to refer to a jurisdictional space of the Communist Party; thus, ‘national’ meant ‘Malayan’. Before the establishment of the MCP, the Chinese communists imagined the place where they were as the ‘Nanyang’, and the ‘Malayan Peninsula’ as a place inhabited by different ethnic groups (*minzu*). By promoting the ‘national’ (that is, Malayan) party and the Malayan revolution, the Comintern contributed to the nascent idea of a national Malayan identity and jurisdiction for the Nanyang party with which the MCP was equated.

Nonetheless, the boundaries between the Malaya party and the Nanyang party remained ambiguous. From 1929, the CCP had planned that the ‘Communist Party of Nanyang nationalities’ (*kommunisticheskaya partiya nan’yanskikh narodnostey*) would include the ‘Indian islands’, namely the Malayan archipelago, Burma, and the Annam and Siam committees.¹⁰⁷ At the MCP’s founding conference, the Nanyang party was to be renamed as the ‘Nanyang Various Peoples Communists’ Joint Secretariat’ as a transitional organization to the ‘Communist Party in the Various Oppressed Peoples of Nanyang’ and would include a ‘Malay Communist Party’ or ‘Communist Committee of Malay Peninsula’.¹⁰⁸ Comintern

103 ‘To the Malayan comrades’.

104 ‘A letter from the Central Committee’; RGASPI, 495/62/1/1–17, ‘To the Central Committee’.

105 RGASPI, 514/1/634/93–158, ‘Minutes of the third representative conference’, pp. 118–19.

106 RGASPI, 495/62/1/23–7, ‘Resolyutsiya priniataya posle obsledovaniya raboty vremennogo komiteta v 1929 (Resolution adopted after investigation of the work of the [Nanyang] Provisional Committee in 1929)’.

107 RGASPI, 514/1/632/7–28, ‘Otchet o polozhenii v Nanyane (Report about the situation in Nanyang)’, January 1930.

108 RGASPI, 514/1/634/93–158, ‘Minutes of the third representative conference’, p. 120.

documents before 1930 also demonstrate that the ‘Nanyang’ was termed variously the ‘Malay archipelago’, ‘Malay states’, or ‘Indonesia’.¹⁰⁹ As early as 1918 *Nanyang* had been translated into English as ‘Malaysia’ by the first ‘area studies’ institution in China, at Jinan University, and Comintern translators also translated Nanyang as ‘Malaya’.¹¹⁰ In 1934 the Comintern confirmed this conception of the Nanyang as a ‘Malay’ region by assigning the MCP to be responsible for movements in Indonesia, Siam, and Burma.¹¹¹

Malaya was a unique place to promote slogans of support for Chinese and Indian revolutions that would also benefit the Malayan and world revolutions, since in 1931 Indians and Chinese comprised such a sizeable proportion of Malaya’s population – about 16% and 39% respectively.¹¹² In the MCP texts, this translated into the ‘emancipation of the Malay oppressed nationalities’ (*Malai beiyapo de minzu jiefang*) or ‘Malay people’ (*Malai de renmin*), who consisted of ‘complex nationalities’ (*fuza de minzu*).¹¹³ The MCP argued that it had to organize Malay and Indian workers to address the low political awareness of the Chinese masses, which manifested itself in an immigrant mentality.¹¹⁴ In the Darwinian world of revolution, the establishment of a workers’ and peasants’ state would bring liberation to the ‘Malay nation’ (*Malai minzu duli*), which was rendered in English as ‘Malaya’. It would also help overcome economic backwardness and would bring the Malayan civilization to a higher stage of development.¹¹⁵

The Comintern thus provided a new international justification for the internationalism of the Chinese Revolution of Sun Yatsen by merging Chinese nationalism and internationalism together in the MCP’s Malayan nationalism, which in turn paralleled the internationalism promoted by the GMD government in China. According to the British translation of a 1931 address by the president of the Institute of Culture in Shanghai and the president of the Control Yuan of the GMD government, Yu Yujin, ‘The only fault of the weak races of the East is that they are not united. They must form an organisation for the overthrow of Imperialist [*sic*], and China must be its centre.’ To achieve this, the GMD would establish ‘the organisation of an Eastern International by the Chinese Kuomintang with the Three People’s Principles of Dr. Sun Yat Sen as the revolutionary doctrine for all weak Eastern races who are struggling for international, political and economic equality’. This was to be a league against imperialism in the East and would have connections with the Eastern proletariat.

109 RGASPI, 533/10/1818/3–29, ‘Nanyang de baogao: a report of Indonesia, Jan. 16, 1929’; RGASPI, 495/62/1/1–17, ‘Otchet Malayskogo Komiteta profsoyuzov (The report of the Soviet of Trade Unions of the Malay archipelago)’; ‘To the Malayan comrades’.

110 *Zhongguo yu Nanyang (China and Malaysia)*, [*Bulletin of Jinan University*], 1, 1918, in Meng Kequn, ed., *Nanyang shiliao xubian (Compilation of Nanyang historical materials)*, Beijing: Guojia tushuguan chubanshe, 2010, vol. 1, p. 1; RGASPI, 495/62/24/46–7, ‘List of circulars issued by the C.C. of the C.P. of Malaysia’.

111 RGASPI, 495/62/22/13–13ob., ‘Pismo Ts.K. Malayskoy K.P. o VII kongresse i.t.d. (The letter to the CC MCP about the 7th congress of the Comintern etc.)’, 1 June 1934.

112 Roff, *Origins*, p. 208.

113 ‘To the Malayan comrades’; RGASPI, 495/62/13/31–2, ‘Zhongyang tonggao disi hao (Central Committee circular no. 4)’, 10 August 1930; RGASPI, 495/62/23/84–93, ‘Gongren ying zuo shenmo shiqing (What workers should do)’, 15 November 1930.

114 RGASPI, 495/62/13/36–8, ‘Zhongyang tonggao diqi hao (Central Committee circular no. 7)’, 15 September 1930.

115 ‘What workers should do’, p. 86; RGASPI, 495/62/5/9–20, ‘What the workers should stand for’, esp. p. 10.

The document goes on to state, ‘In his will, Dr. Sun urged us to help the weak races and to lead the world’s revolution in order to set up a ‘utopia’ for the world. ... Only then can we be in a position to offer resistance to the imperialistic encroachments and be vanguards of the world revolution.’¹¹⁶

The MCP acted in accordance with the same aspirations. The Malayan AIL was the only Chinese-led organization in Malaya that had non-Chinese members prior to 1930 – two hundred in all.¹¹⁷ In the early 1930s, an MCP member, writer, and teacher from China, Ma Ning, the head of propaganda in the League, participated in a conference of the delegates of ‘Chinese immigrants’ from India, Vietnam, Burma, Malaya, and China held in the jungle near Johor Bahru. This was referred to as the All-Nanyang Colonial Peoples Delegate Congress (*Quan Nanyang ge zhimindi ge minzu daibiao da hui*).¹¹⁸ In 1932, the Malayan AIL leading committee of nine included two Malays and two Indians, and the 6,547 members from all communist-led labour, peasants’, cultural, women’s, and children’s organizations included 135 Indians, more than 322 Malays, and 10 Javanese.¹¹⁹

Matching the indigenization directives of the Comintern and the CCP, but also as a reaction to anti-Chinese and pro-Malay legislation in 1932–33, the MCP and Tan Cheng Lock both promoted Malayanization (but not becoming Malay) and unification of all ‘races’.¹²⁰ The MCP promoted the ‘Malayanization’ (*Malaiyahua*) of the party as a way of mobilizing the support of the Malay and Indian communities in protest against the Alien Registration Ordinance (1933), which targeted Chinese immigrants and led to the deportation of many suspected communists. This, it was argued, was for the sake of the revolutionary movement of the suffering working masses of Malaya (*Malaiya gongnong laoku qunzhong*) and the Malay nation (*Malai minzu*).¹²¹ In 1933, the Malay Reservation Enactment was amended to ensure that non-Malays were excluded from land traditionally held by Malays.¹²² This fostered the MCP’s need to be rooted in the host environment of Malaya as well as the Chinese homeland,¹²³ and became obvious in the double meaning of *minzu* in MCP texts as both ‘Malaya’ and ‘China’.¹²⁴ However, with overall MCP

116 CO, 273-572, ‘A review of the misery of the weak races of the East’, from *Wenhua banniankan* (*Culture Biannual*), February 1931, in *MRCA*, June 1931, pp. 49–51.

117 C. F. Yong, comment in ‘Early history of the Malayan Communist Party’, in Chin and Hack, *Dialogues*, p. 72.

118 Yu Yueting, ‘Ma Ning yige beiyiwang de liao bu chao de ‘zuoyi’ zuojia (Ma Ning: a forgotten extraordinary left-wing writer)’, in Zhao Ting, ed., *Shifan qun ying guanghui zhonghua (diershi jian)* (*Teachers heroes, shining China. Vol. 20*), Xi’an: Shaanxi renmin jiaoyu chubanshe, 1994, pp. 176–85.

119 CO, 273-585, *MRCA*, March 1933, pp. 21, 24.

120 Tan Cheng Lock’s address at the legislative council, Malacca, 12 February 1934, in *Malayan problems*, pp. 95–109, esp. pp. 95–7.

121 RGASPI, 495/62/20/1–6, ‘Magong lianzi tonggao di yi hao. Dantuan zhongyang guanyu waiqiao dengji lülie yu womende gongzuo de jueyi (MCP Central Circular no. 1. Resolution regarding the Alien Registration Ordinance)’, 12 October 1932.

122 Francis Kok-Wah Loh, *Beyond the tin mines: coolies, squatters, and New Villagers in the Kinta Valley, Malaysia, c. 1880–1980*, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 33.

123 Kuhn, *Chinese among others*.

124 RGASPI, 495/62/28/18–36, ‘Magong dier ci zhong zhihui yi yijuean (The resolutions of the second plenum of the Executive Committee of the Central Committee of the MCP)’, 20 February 1940.

membership in decline by 1934, due to arrests, one letter mentions only seven Malays (although it does not state if this refers to all Malays in the party, which had a total membership of 588).¹²⁵ The total union membership of 6,035 included 518 Malay and 52 Indians.¹²⁶ Malay membership in the Singapore CYL increased from three in 1932 to twenty in 1934 (with 411 Chinese). During 1932, in the Singapore labour union, the number of Indians fell from 120 to 20 and Malays from 50 to 20 (total membership of 3,000).¹²⁷

Since 1931 the MCP had printed propaganda material in Malay, and in 1934 language help was received from Indonesian communists, although the latter were concerned with the independence of Indonesia rather than Malaya.¹²⁸ In the same year, when the Comintern requested that the MCP send Malays to Moscow for training, the MCP responded that it was difficult to persuade the five Malay comrades (*ma ji*) to leave their families. Lack of help from local organizations was also blamed for the dearth of Malay involvement, and many MCP members considered efforts in this direction to be futile.¹²⁹ Despite the party having founded the ‘Malayan Racial Emancipation League’ in 1936, headed by a committee with two Tamils and two Malays, MCP membership remained ‘almost entirely’ Chinese, possibly because of the anti-immigrant stand of Malay nationalism.¹³⁰

When the Japanese invaded Malaya in 1941, MCP influence was still strongest among the Chinese community.¹³¹ A few Malays, including the MCP post-war leader, Abdullah C. D., joined the MCP-led anti-Japanese resistance army, but they were often distrusted because of Malay–Japanese collaboration.¹³² Unlike Indonesia, where the communist party had consisted of local nationalists from its outset,¹³³ in Malaya Malay and Indian labour activists and members of the KMM did not join the MCP until 1947–48. This came as a reaction to the British government’s arrests of KMM members in the Malay Nationalist Party, which had allied with the MCP in agitating for political reform. Nonetheless, the MCP’s Malayan National Liberation Army was 95% Chinese in the 1950s.¹³⁴

125 RGASPI, 495/62/27/1–5, ‘Magong lai jian (A document received from the MCP)’, 25 August 1934; RGASPI, 495/62/22/1–7, Guo Guang, ‘Magong lai xin san hao (A letter from the MCP no. 3)’, 24 March 1934.

126 RGASPI, 495/62/24/13–16ob., ‘Report of Labour Federation of Malaya no. 1 to the Profintern’.

127 CO, 273-580, MRCA, October 1932, p. 37; RGASPI, 495/62/27/7, ‘Malai zhongyang lai jian (A document received from the Central Committee of the MCP)’, 25 August 1934.

128 CO, 273-572, MRCA, December 1931, pp. 31–48; RGASPI, 495/62/22/14–17, Central Committee of the MCP, ‘Surat yang terbuka kepada saudara-saudara kita malayu dan Indian (An open letter to our Malay and Indian brothers)’, 1934; CO, 273-616, Straits Settlement Police Special Branch, ‘Review of communism in Malaya during 1934’, *Political Intelligence Journal*, 31 December 1934, pp. 2, 3.

129 Guo, ‘Letter from the MCP, no. 3’, p. 5.

130 CO, 273-630, ‘Supplement no. 1 of 1937 to the Straits Settlements Police Special Branch Political Intelligence Journal: review of communist activities in Malaya, 1936’, pp. 3, 4; CO, 273-630, ‘Straits Settlement Police Special Branch report for the year 1936’, p. 7.

131 RGASPI, 495/62/29/65–86, ‘Sokraschenniy perevod broshury Malaya segonya sostavlennoi na kitayskom yazyke, 1939 (Abridged translation of brochure “Malaya today”, composed in Chinese, 1939)’.

132 Cheah, *Red star*, pp. 71, 322 n. 37.

133 McVey, *Rise of Indonesian communism*.

134 ‘Early history of the Malayan Communist Party’, p. 74, n. 13.

It was in their focus on locally born Chinese that the Comintern and CCP goals of indigenization coincided. By 1934, at the request of the Comintern, the MCP had been able to send several locally born Chinese to Moscow.¹³⁵ By this time, the second generation of Malayan Chinese had become involved in the ‘Nanyang revolution’ – which the MCP now referred to as the ‘Malayan revolution’ – even if they were not MCP members. They launched struggles against school authorities and contributed money and language skills to the revolution. There are many examples, but one typical case is Un Hong Siu (Yin Hongzhao in Mandarin), the son of a silver and gold merchant, who financially supported the MCP and translated communist propaganda from the United States and from Comintern documents.¹³⁶ The MCP thus became localized through the involvement of locally born Chinese.

Conclusion

By 1930 Comintern insistence on the founding of national parties based on separate countries led the MCP to become early adopters of the multi-ethnic Malayan state. Through encouraging a Malayan revolution, the Comintern stimulated the ‘nationalization’ of the revolution in Malaya, as opposed to a revolution led by international or expatriate forces. However, though the Chinese communists sought to create a non-Chinese revolution, they continued to perceive the Nanyang in terms of China’s regional imagination, where China was the leader. In this context, the Comintern’s communist internationalism and support for the Chinese revolution was understood by the newly formed MCP as referring to the defence of Chinese interests and the liberation of oppressed nations. This became the key to the internationalization and legitimization of diasporic Chinese nationalism in Southeast Asia as promoted by the Nanjing government. For Chinese communists located in Singapore and Malaya, the evolving discourse matched the indigenizing need of Chinese associations. Chinese nationalism grafted onto Comintern internationalism became Malayan nation-based nationalism, locally relevant and internationally progressive. This allowed the MCP to secure an unoccupied niche necessary for localization – the niche of liberators of Malaya. Nonetheless, localization remained problematic and the MCP attributed its failure to lead the masses in protests against British wartime policies in the autumn of 1939 to the adoption of unsuitable CCP slogans.¹³⁷

Both the GMD and the MCP Asian liberation projects, *Minzu Guoji* and the Malayan multi-ethnic nation, resonated with the Zeitgeist of other ‘pan-movements’ of the 1920s and 1930s whose organizations were built on trans-local ties that had regional and global imaginations, and of interwar global, Malayan, and Comintern public spheres.¹³⁸ Like other

135 Guo, ‘Letter from the MCP no. 3’, p. 5; Shanghai Municipal Police Files (henceforth, SMP), D6152, ‘Letter from Guo Guang to the FEB, 15 August 1934, pp. 1–6.

136 SMP, D6954, ‘Letter from H.B.M. Consulate-General concerning Malayan communists’, 30 August 1935.

137 RGASPI, 495/62/28/53–84, ‘Maijin (Forward)’, December 1939–early 1941.

138 Anna Belogurova, ‘The civic world of international communism: the Taiwanese communists and the Comintern (1921–1931)’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 46, 6, 2012, pp. 1602–32; Andrew Arsan, Su Lin Lewis, and Anne I. Richard, ‘Editorial: the roots of global civil society and the interwar moment’, *Journal of Global History*, 7, 2, 2012, pp. 157–65.

translation slippages,¹³⁹ the case of *minzu* reflected the balance of power, but in the end the Comintern, which itself disbanded in 1943, developed CCP networks into a kind of ‘International of Nationalities’ in the Nanyang, this being the MCP. The Comintern lost contact with the MCP in 1934 and did not recognize the MCP as a Comintern section at the seventh congress in 1935. During 1934–36, however, the quest for Comintern resources and legitimacy pushed Chinese communists in Indochina to stay in touch with one another, and at this time the MCP finally established connections with Chinese-speaking communists in Java.¹⁴⁰ The workings of interwar globalization through the Comintern thus strengthened Chinese networks and provided a rhetorical tool for a new sense of territorially bounded ‘nations’.

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139 See Lydia Liu, *The clash of empires: the invention of China in modern world making*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006.

140 RGASPI, 495/14/385/12, ‘Dokladnaya zapiska politicheskoi komissii IKKI (The report of the political commission of the Eastern Secretariat of the ECCI)’, 27 July 1935; SMP, D7376, Letter of the Siamese Communist Party to the MCP, 5 March 1936; Guo, ‘Letter from the MCP no. 3’, p. 6.