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RECLAIMING NATIONAL BELONGING: THE POLITICS OF WORLD WAR TWO COMMEMORATION IN WEST MALAYSIA

申索国家的归属：西马二战纪念活动的政治性解读

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Abstract

This article examines the dynamics generated by two different World War Two commemorative initiatives of the Chinese Malaysian community between the mid-1990s and 2007 in the production, revival and contestation of the historical memory of the Japanese invasion and occupation of peninsular Malaysia under the shadow of the Malay-dominated, anti-Communist official historical narratives. At the core of the contention was due recognition of the traumatic historical experience of the community and the anti-Japanese resistance role played by the Communist-led and Chinese-dominated Malayan Peoples' Anti-Japanese Army. The Chinese community leaders and the left-wing social groups positioned their historical war experience of trauma and struggle as constitutive of the nation-building history of the country, for which

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they deserved a legitimate place in the memory of the nation. A discursive analysis of the verbal skirmishes over these commemorative activities unravels how these contestations over historical memories and their interpretation may be understood in the context of ethnic politics of national identity.

Keywords: politics of commemoration, ethnic politics, national identity, historical memory, Malayan Communist Party (MCP), Malayan Peoples' Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA)

摘要

马来西亚华社在1990年代中期开始举办两种纪念二战历史的活动。本文解析这两种不同的纪念模式在马来人支配的反共官方历史论述的阴影下，对日本入侵与占领马来半岛时期的历史记忆之生产、复原与争端的动态过程。

争论的核心是承认当时华社在二战历史中的创伤以及肯定以华人为主的共产党所领导的人民抗日军对抗日军的角色。华社领袖和左翼社会团体将他们在战争历史经验中的创伤与奋斗过程定位为国族建构历史的一部分，故此理应让他们在国家历史记忆中占有合法性的地位。对纪念活动掀起的冲突与舌战所做出的证论式分析，揭示了这些历史记忆的争议与诠释可以从族群政治化的国家认同脉络下去理解。

关键词：纪念的政治性、族群政治、国族认同、历史记忆、马来亚共产党、马来亚人民抗日军

Introduction

In his study of the politics of memory of violent conflicts and trauma, Dawson (2005) notes that, 'memories of the war - concerning, for example, what is at stake in the conflict, the justification of organised violence, what has been perpetrated and suffered, and by whom – structure the identities of participants and underpin their broader political aspirations in respect of a settlement.' (p. 153) The Japanese military advancement in British Malaya during World War Two (therein WWII) elicited different responses from among the ethnic Chinese, Malay and Indian communities in Malaysia and Singapore. The differentiated treatments experienced

by these communities under the Japanese military regime considerably influenced their appreciation of this tumultuous period of Malayan history (Blackburn 2009; Ting 2013) and the ethnic dynamics during the subsequent train of events set off following the retreat of the defeated Japanese army.

This article examines two initiatives undertaken by different social groups in the Chinese community between the mid-1990s and 2007 in the production, revival and contestation of the historical memory of the Japanese invasion and occupation of peninsular Malaysia under the shadow of the Malay-dominated, anti-Communist official historical narratives[1]. To rephrase it in terms of the distinction made between dominant ethnicity and national identity by Kaufmann and Haklai (2008), these episodes occurred in a political context whereby the ethnic nationalism of the politically dominant majority is conflated with the national identity.

At the heart of the controversies was the leading role in anti-Japanese resistance played by the Chinese-dominated Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA) under the leadership of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP). Through discursive analysis of the commemorative texts used in their memorial activities in honour of deceased wartime compatriots, I demonstrate that the Chinese community leaders and the left-wing social group articulated their historical experience and struggle as constitutive of the nation-building history of the country, for which they deserved due recognition from the state and a legitimate place in the memory of the nation. The verbal skirmishes with Malay politicians over these commemorative activities unravel how these contestations over historical memories and their interpretation may be understood in the context of ethnic politics of national identity.

Conceptual Framework

Cenotaphs constitute an emblematic artefact in the modern culture of nationalism (Anderson 1991). Their importance lies in the national imaginings they evoke as public homage is accorded in commemorative ceremonies. In terms of national memories, mourning is arguably more noteworthy than victories, for the former

demand obligations and common efforts. Ernest Renan (1823-1892), in his renowned lecture on the concept of nation, remarked that shared suffering unites a nation more potently than collective joy (Renan 1997: 32). The common experience of an anti-colonial war and its struggle for independence may constitute the founding collective memory uniting a political community. Nonetheless, the traumatic experiences of a civil war may also profoundly divide society for more than a generation to come.

In our examination of the case of Malaysia, two wars were involved, that is, the invasion of the Japanese and the occupation of Malaya (1941-1945 during WWII), and the armed conflicts from 1948, pitting the predominantly Chinese MCP against the British colonial regime. The Federation of Malaya attained independence from Britain in 1957 amidst the ongoing waging of warfare. Though the military threat of the MCP was brought under control during the 1960s with its remnant troops seeking refuge at the Thai-Malayan border, skirmishes flared up from time to time till the signature of an official peace treaty in December 1989. This article examines the commemoration of specific events during WWII, but the social memory of the second more contentious civil war exerts its influence from the background.

The politics of war memory and commemoration is about 'the struggle of different groups to give public articulation to, and hence gain recognition for, certain memories and the narratives within which they are structured' (Ashplant, Dawson and Roper 2000: 16). The socio-political space of the nation-state constitutes a fundamental arena in which the politics of war commemoration takes place as the dominant official national narrative is being contested. Social actors operating within a particular socio-political space or 'social arena' attempt to extend the acceptance or recognition of their narratives of memory to other social arenas, whose endeavour may be resisted by other social groups. The socio-political spaces within which such memory narrative may circulate range from networks of families or kinship groups, communities of geography or interest, nation-states' public sphere, and transnational power blocs (Ashplant, Dawson and Roper 2000).

For our case, private remembrance activities at the family or kinship level for those deceased during WWII are known to occur yearly at different locations. This

article mainly examines the struggles located in the second (ethnic community[2]) and third (public sphere of nation-state) social arenas to preserve and revive particular aspects of the memory of WWII. The ethnicised twist in the appreciation of these historical events will be examined, as well as the division manifested in the politics of commemoration and the construction of war memorials from the mid-1990s. While the international dimension is present – attendance of the Chinese embassy's representative and Japanese citizens in commemorative activities, conveying protest messages against the Japanese government's stand on WWII, suing the Japanese government for wartime compensation – it is not the main focus of the article.

Collective memory usually evolves over the medium and long term due to generational transition. The state often uses the history curriculum in schools to pass on or perpetuate specific interpretations of key historical events judged to be crucial in articulating official national identity (cf., e.g. Resnik 2003[3]). In other cases, public rituals and official commemorative activities may also serve the same purpose. In this process, the version of the dominant group usually prevails as the official discourse while the perspective of the marginalised group is 'privatised' (Dawson 2005: 155) and confined within the group as 'private remembrance'. These commemorative activities may be understood as an attempt to reclaim public space for remembrance.

Historical Background

The Chinese community in Malaya suffered greatly under the Japanese occupation between 1942 and 1945. One official estimation put the total death toll of the Chinese community under Japanese occupation as four hundred thousand, which constituted about 17% of the community then[4]. A particularly devastating event at the inception of the Japanese occupation was a series of military operations called *sook ching* (肃清, meaning liquidation), whereby more than a hundred thousand Chinese, including women and children, were massacred.[5] Many others fled into the jungle and joined the British-armed and trained MPAJA formed by the MCP to fight the Japanese as guerrillas. While the MPAJA was led by the MCP, many of the MPAJA

members were not communists (Cheah 1983: 63). The Japanese administration also ordered the Chinese community to pay 50 million Straits Dollars as an 'offering of atonement' for their pre-war anti-Japanese activities. The local Indian community, on the other hand, received a relatively better treatment owing to the fact that the Japanese needed their collaboration to fight the British on the Indian sub-continent.

British-educated Malay bureaucratic elites were co-opted into the Japanese administration and appointed as District Officers (a position which was formerly the preserve of British officers) and village headmen. Malays were also recruited as policemen and volunteers in defence units (Cheah 1983). These people were regarded by the Chinese-dominated MPAJA as Japanese collaborators and were the targets of reprisal and executions.

This set the scenario for Sino-Malay clashes during the Interregnum period when the withdrawal of the Japanese troops left a power vacuum prior to the arrival of the British army. Violent Sino-Malay clashes broke out in pockets of Malaya, due in part to overzealous reprisals by individual Chinese MPAJA leaders against Malay villagers deemed to have been Japanese collaborators (Cheah 1983)[6]. The actions of the MPAJA were interpreted or misrepresented as Chinese victimisation of and domination over the Malay masses, leading to the emergence of a para-military group called the Red Bands of the Sabilillah (Holy War) Army led by Kiyai Salleh. The latter went about killing not just MPAJA members but innocent Chinese people, including defenceless women and children (Cheah 1981: 109). This fostered mutual mistrust and suspicion between the two communities. This historical context underscored the repeated Sino-Malay political antagonism during the decade leading to the independence of British Malaya in 1957.

In 1948, when the British administration declared the State of Emergency in anticipation of communist armed revolt, they 'racialised' the insurrection as a Chinese struggle in their psychological propaganda. Frontline anti-communist military operations involved mainly Malay soldiers, while Chinese were recruited for the Special Branch of the police force to infiltrate the enemy and collect intelligence reports. The British were only able to gain the upper hand following their strategy to

relocate forcibly more than half a million of mostly Chinese living in the peripheral areas of the jungle into militarily guarded and barricaded 'new villages', effectively cutting off an important supply of food and information to the MCP guerrilla forces in the jungle.

Official Articulation of National Historical Perspective

After independence, the determination of ethno-nationalist Malay social groups to assert cultural and symbolic dominance bore fruits progressively over the decades. This has given rise to the articulation of a Malay-dominated, and increasingly, Islam-dominated national narrative and official identity (Cheah 2003; Ting 2009a). For our purposes here, the official position on certain aspects of these historical events may be gleaned from two sources. The first is the conduct of official commemoration of heroic warfighters and, secondly, from the secondary school history textbooks endorsed by the Education Ministry.

The official memorial park to commemorate servicemen who fought and died for the country accommodates two war monuments. The British built the old, 10-metre-cenotaph to commemorate soldiers who died in combat during the First World War, but dates of WWII and the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960) were subsequently added. Nonetheless, the annual military commemoration conducted in the presence of the King and the Prime Minister, till 2009, took place at the second monument erected in 1966, known as the *Tugu Negara*. This consists of a 15-metre-tall bronze sculpture of soldiers placed on a huge granite base. Engraved on the granite base is the message in English and Jawi-script Malay, 'Dedicated to the heroic fighters in the cause of peace and freedom. May the blessing of Allah be upon them.' There are five standing sculptures of soldiers of the defence forces and two fallen ones depicting the corpses of communist fighters. The area was declared a memorial park dedicated to the 11,000 people who died during the Emergency.

Hence *Tugu Negara* is mainly associated with the anti-communist conflicts during the Malayan Emergency. The MCP was particularly offended by *Tugu Negara*,

which depicted a fallen communist fighter being stepped on. In 1975, a splintered group of the MCP detonated an explosion at the monument, which sustained extensive damage. During their peace negotiation with the Malaysian government between 1988 and 1989, the MCP put on the negotiating table - among other issues - the demolition of *Tugu Negara* as one of the conditions for the peace settlement (Chin 2003: 486). As a replacement, MCP delegates suggested a monument depicting the three main races of Malaysia – Malays, Chinese and Indians – fighting together for independence. The negotiation of this issue was later abandoned when it was made clear to the MCP leaders that its demolition and replacement required the approval of the parliament (p. 493). The requirement of parliamentary approval implied that the whole process would be subjected to the vicissitude of political forces at work. This would subject the fate of the settlement to uncertainty and the risk of a political dead end.

The writing and framing of the national history of Malaysia, which affected how school textbooks have been written, has been a subject of continued debate over the decades. At the centre of contention by the non-Malay communities has been the incremental Malay and Islamic bias, and the corresponding lack of due recognition of the role and contribution of the former to the country in the past (Ting 2014; Cheah 2003). The 1980s saw the emergence of a school of Malay 'nationalist' historians who argued that Malays constituted the 'base society' of the Malaysian nation, and that national history should be based on Malay history (Cheah 2003; Malik 1981)[7].

Subsequently, the 1992 version of the Form Five textbook, in accordance with the 1987 instruction from the Education Minister, affirmed the Malays as 'the original inhabitants' of the country and their 'special position' in the national identity of the country (Cheah 2003: 247-248). On the other hand, the immigrant and opportunistic character of the historical presence of Chinese and Indian communities in Malaya was emphasised. Within a decade, the controversial expression *ketuanan Melayu* was first introduced in Form Three (2004) and Form Five (2003) history textbooks. The root word *tuan* means 'master' or 'owner'. Hence *ketuanan Melayu* effectively makes the claim of ownership or the right to rule or control the country by the Malays. Flowing

from the same logic, the grant of citizenship to the non-Malay communities based on *jus soli* after independence is described in terms of the largesse and magnanimity of the Malay community who sacrificed to share their homeland. This served as a justification to provide for a privileged position of the Malay community in the newly independent nation (Ting 2009b). This historical perspective is contested by non-Malay citizens in the country, in particular the younger generations[8].

While the Japanese occupation of the country has always been included in history textbooks, there was a shift in the emphasis of the narratives over time. The 1990 edition of the Form 3 textbook, in particular, downplayed the cruelty of the Japanese actions and made no mention of the Japanese massacres of Chinese. It emphasised instead the 'Japanese military victory over British forces ... and its contribution to the awakening of Malay nationalism' (Cheah 2003: 251). The anti-Japanese resistance role of the MPAJA was only mentioned in passing while the smaller Malay guerrillas in Force 136 were accorded detailed description.

Cheah (2003) illustrated how this shift reflected the official stand of the Malaysian government led by the conservative Malay nationalist party, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), which exerted disproportionate influence over its multiracial coalition. Japanese Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa and his successor Muruyama, admitted Japan's guilt and made an unambiguous apology for Japan's action during the war, respectively, in September 1993 and August 15, 1995. In stark disjuncture with the general sentiment of the older generation of Chinese Malaysians, Prime Minister Dr Mahathir, also the UMNO President, told the visiting Japanese Prime Minister Muruyama in early 1994 that there was no need for Japan to keep apologising over its conduct in WWII. During the 1995 state commemorative ceremonies marking the fiftieth anniversary of the end of WWII, several Malay personalities even credited the Japanese occupation as a 'catalyst' to Malaya's independence as it was supportive of a Malay nationalist movement and inspiring anti-colonial spirit (Cheah 2003).

The 2004 edition of the Form Three textbook adopted a similar orientation. It put the blame on US sanctions for the Japanese military invasion of Southeast

Asian countries (p. 4). The textbook described the local Chinese community merely as 'not only treated harshly but also killed by the Japanese military', with the blame attributed to their prior anti-Japanese mobilisation in the Sino-Japanese war in 1937 (p. 23). While the anti-Japanese defence of the Malay Regiment was accorded almost one whole page in the Form Three History Textbook (p. 11), the predominantly Chinese volunteer battalion 'Dalforce' was not even mentioned.

In the 2004 Form Three Textbook, the MPAJA as the major group fighting Japanese occupation was listed as just one among many other smaller groups in a table, while photos of two smaller Malay resistance groups took up another full page (p. 26)[9]. Then in the second chapter of the Form Three textbook, the MPAJA and the MCP were accused of carrying out 'terrorism' against Malay villagers during the Interregnum period, while Kiyai Salleh who formed the Chinese-killing squad was portrayed in a positive light as a 'notable' or 'hero' (*tokoh*) (pp. 45-48). The caption of a photo showing a marching MPAJA troop described it as a 'coloniser' and asked provocatively whether 'we' want a repeat of such situation (p. 46). Another hand-drawn picture showed four 'MCP members' killing and terrorising several villagers 'without mercy' (p. 47)[10].

Commemorating Martyred Compatriots under Japanese Occupation

The cataclysmic event during WWII, which has left a profound imprint on the war memory of a great number of the older generation of the local Chinese community, was *sook ching*. As well as in Singapore, the Japanese also carried out mass executions in Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Melaka, Johor Bahru, Muar, Parit Tinggi, Jelulung, etc. Up to a hundred mass graves, individual tombs and cenotaphs in memory of those killed under the *sook ching* operations scattered all over Malaysia, especially those states with a large Chinese population (MCCMCJO 2004: 63). Local level commemorative ceremonies or remembrance rituals by family members and relatives are quietly carried out without coordination, particularly on the day of *Qing*

Ming, a day in the Chinese calendar marked for ancestral worship or paying respect to the deceased of the family.

In June 1995, four Chinese associations in the Klang Valley (i.e. in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor)[11] initiated a collective commemoration of war dead under the Japanese occupation, which has since become a yearly practice. The catalyst for the organisation of the commemorative ceremony was a worldwide movement to remember the tens of millions of people who perished during WWII. In conjunction with the 50th anniversary of the end of WWII, the United Nations declared 1995 as the World Year of Peoples' Commemoration of the Victims of the Second World War.

Commemoration of the war dead under the Japanese occupation was deemed a 'sensitive' subject by some of the local Chinese community leaders[12]. The committee managed to obtain the support of Ong Ka Ting, who was then the Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Home Affairs, to be an advisor of the committee.[13] This gave the committee added legitimacy and political protection should they get into trouble with the authority (Wu 2006).

The committee planned four activities between 12 and 15 August 1995. They included a Pacific War history knowledge competition participated by eight Chinese-medium independent secondary schools in the Klang Valley, a seminar on the Japanese occupation in Malaya, a two-day historical photo exhibition of the Pacific War. The culmination of the activities was a commemorative ceremony held at a mass grave of more than 500 *sook ching* victims at the Hokkien Cemetery in Sungai Besi, Kuala Lumpur, on August 15, 1995. This was attended by representatives of various Chinese associations located in the Klang Valley.

During the ceremony, a text of commemoration was read out by a representative. The text was then burnt. A wreath was laid at the tomb, and bugle call was played, followed by a three-minute silence. Doves and balloons symbolising peace were then released. The ceremony ended with all the attendants of the ceremony bowing three times in front of the mass grave. The entire ceremony was conducted in Mandarin, hence confined to the Chinese community.

The following year, similar activities were planned. This time, 13 teams were

sent by eight Chinese-medium private secondary schools for the history knowledge competition. A book compiling information on the Pacific War in Mandarin was produced and launched at the opening of the Pacific War photo exhibition. The commemorative ceremony in 1996 attracted more than a hundred people representing more than 30 Chinese associations. Two Japanese anti-war non-governmental organisations sent representatives to attend the ceremony.

Subsequently, the commemorative activities became a yearly affair. The organising committee was renamed as Selangor-Kuala Lumpur Committee for the Commemoration of Martyred Compatriots under Japanese Occupation (雪隆区纪念日据时期殉难同胞委员会) in 1998. Over the years, the number of Chinese associations sponsoring the organising committee increased from four to 23. Even though the majority of the associations are Selangor- or Klang Valley-based, a number of national level Chinese organisations whose headquarters are seated in the Klang Valley also joined the organising committee. The name of the committee was modified accordingly to Malaysian Committee for the Commemoration of Martyred Compatriots under Japanese Occupation[14] (马来西亚纪念日据时期殉难同胞委员会, herein abbreviated as MCCMCJO) in 2001. More significantly, the Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall (SCAH), the leading umbrella organisation for Chinese associations in the Klang Valley, formally became the principal convenor of the commemorative activities in 1999. The committee was effectively absorbed into SCAH as one of its sub-units.

Commemorative activities also saw efforts to reach a wider audience by holding the yearly photo exhibition at more accessible locations and showing films and slide shows related to the Pacific War. The MCCMCJO also organised dinner concerts of wartime resistance songs. Participants in the Pacific War history knowledge competition were also extended to some national secondary schools as well as some from outside the Klang Valley. The committee undertook to enlarge and laminate many of the 500 over Pacific War historical photos collected and donated by various parties. The collection was available for public use by schools or associations organising war exhibitions throughout the country.

A series of publications have been produced over the years by the committee. Many are documentary in nature, and some others take a reflective and testimonial approach to the Pacific War as well as the commemorative activities. Themes covered include selective documentation of tombs of fallen heroes and mass graves under Japanese occupation in Malaysia, a compilation of data on the 'atonement funds' handed over to the Japanese regime, minutes of the organising committee and reprint of newspaper cuttings, as well as historical essays on the Pacific War.

In 2001, international controversies broke out regarding the new Japanese secondary history textbooks, which sought to justify the Japanese military invasion of East and Southeast Asian countries. The textbooks described Japan's actions as acts of self-defence against Western Imperialism and acts that benefited the Asian people. They downplayed and omitted the atrocities the Japanese army committed against defenceless civilians. To add more fuel to the fire, Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi visited Yasukuni Shrine to honour Japan's war dead on the anniversary of Japan's surrender in WWII. The Shrine contains the remains of wartime leaders as well as convicted war criminals.

In response, MCCMCJO organised a small exhibition of Japanese textbooks as well as newspaper cuttings regarding the controversies. They also held a demonstration in front of the Japanese Embassy and handed in a protest memorandum with more than three thousand signatures to the Japanese embassy for the revised history textbook and the visit of Koizumi to Yasukuni Shrine. The latter's act was widely seen as condoning Japanese militarism during the 1930s and 1940s. Statements of protests were also issued in subsequent years over the Japanese prime minister's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine.

The mass grave at the Hokkien Cemetery in Sungai Besi was subsequently renovated with inscriptions in Malay, English and Japanese added[15]. The renovation work, completed in 2006 but whose opening ceremony was held in 2008, also provided space for the holding of commemorative rites and even for a car park. In December 2018, a much bigger World War II Memorial Peace Park was built on Kuala Lumpur Kwong Tong cemetery land.

MCCMCJO had also toyed with the idea of seeking reparations from Japan at the International Court of Justice in the Hague for the forced wartime contribution on behalf of victims' descendants. In view of this, one of its publications documents in concrete details various sources of the contribution of the 'atonement funds'. Eventually, the Federation of Chinese Assembly Halls in Malaysia (马来西亚中华大会堂联合会, henceforth referred to by its acronym, Tang Lian 堂联) sent a memorandum to the Japanese Embassy in Malaysia to seek compensation amounting to five hundred million ringgit[16].

The 9-1 Martyrs' Grave and Nilai Peace Memorial Garden

Parallel to these yearly commemorative activities, a cenotaph in Sungai Tua, Batu Caves (north of Kuala Lumpur), commemorating high-level MCP and MPAJA leaders who died during an ambush by the Japanese military on September 1 1942, was brought to public attention in 2000. The cenotaph stood on Malay reserved land, and permission was sought from the landowner to give time for its relocation. However, before the relocation could take place, it was broken when the land was cleared for development at the end of the same year.

The September 1 1942 event was historically very significant to the MPAJA. The MCP subsequently learnt that their turncoat secretary general, Lai Tek, betrayed them and arranged for their top leaders to be rounded up by the Japanese. In the memoirs of Chin Peng, the last general secretary of the MCP, the chapter describing their experience during this period is entitled, 'a succession of betrayals'. One after another, the most senior and able cadres of the MCP were eliminated. The one on September 1 1942 was the most devastating in terms of the loss in number of senior cadres. According to Chin Peng, it was the first major action involving MPAJA forces. Lai Tek ordered forty top officials of the MCP to attend the meeting. Half of those who arrived for the meeting were killed by the Japanese on the spot. Only some managed to escape and avoid execution (Chin 2003: 79-80). This incident dealt a heavy blow to the military capacity of the MCP-led MPAJA guerrilla resistance.

Gecinta, the committee tasked to oversee the rehabilitation of the cenotaph, managed to get Xiao En Group, the owner of the Nilai Memorial Park in Negeri Sembilan, to donate a piece of land to relocate the cenotaph. The plan was for the Xiao En Cultural Foundation to help conceptualise and develop the land into a peace memorial garden, including the relocated cenotaph, a new monument to commemorate all fallen heroes engaged in the anti-Japanese resistance regardless of race and origins as well as a war museum. The leaders in Gecinta are also members of Phoenix Friendship Association Malaysia. The association consists of former leaders and members of the defunct Labour Party. Many of them were political prisoners under the Internal Security Act during the sixties and seventies. They want to reclaim what they see as the rightful place of the history of the leftist political movement in the country. The initiative also receives loose support from veteran MCP members.

The first stage of the plan was the rehabilitation of the relocated 9-1 Martyrs' cenotaph. In their efforts to do so, Gecinta committee members encountered repeated harassment from the Special Branch of the police. When Gecinta stood firm in their determination to erect the cenotaph, they were warned against inserting individual gravestones with the inscription of the names and positions in the MPAJA of the 18 martyred leaders. As Gecinta managed to get the sponsorship of Ong Ka Ting and three other deputy ministers from the MCA for the project, quiet political mediation behind the scene enabled the effort to finally come to fruition in 2003. From then on, commemorative rites were held every year at the site. Nonetheless, in deference to the warnings of the Special Branch, the slabs at the 9-1 Martyrs' Grave intended for some explanatory texts remain blank up to the present, and the 18 tombstones are devoid of inscription, except for the original seven Mandarin words inscribed on the old cenotaph.

In 2005, Gecinta also named September 1 as 'Loyal Souls' Day' (忠魂节). They also co-sponsored the large-scale commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the end of WWII with 12 other Chinese associations on September 27 2005, dubbed 'Commemoration of the 60th Anniversary of the Malayan People's Resistance to Japanese Invasion in Defence of Malaya'. Notable among the leading organisers are

the SCAH, Hua Zong (华总)[17], MCCMCJO and Gecinta. The Chinese Ambassador for Malaysia and the Deputy Minister for Youth and Sports Ministry then, Ong Tee Kiat, were also present to deliver their speeches. The Commemorative Declaration put forward four resolutions:

1) The condemnation of the repeated visits to the Yasukuni Shrine by Japanese leaders;
2) The affirmation of the rights reserved to demand war compensations;
3) The designation of August 15 as a day to commemorate the resistance movement and war victims;
4) A call to the Malaysian government to take positive steps to educate the younger generation on the anti-Japanese resistance movement and lessons of the War.

In 2006, besides the memorial service at the cenotaph, Gecinta, together with around twenty other Chinese associations also organised other remembrance activities, including a seminar around September 1. On December 15 2006, the peace memorial garden and the new 'Anti-Japanese Resistance Martyrs Monument' were launched, and a memorial rite was organised for the first time in front of the monument.

The following day, on December 16, Information Minister, Zainuddin Maidin, criticised the commemorative activities organised around the war monument. He stated that the monument was built to remember the communists in Malaya, whereas the MCP was once the enemy number one of the nation. He accused the organisers of being insensitive and disrespectful to the numerous Malaysians who died during the communist insurgency. A few days after, echoing the criticisms made by Zainuddin, Negeri Sembilan Chief Minister, Mohamad Hasan, announced that the monument would be demolished. Upon mediation by an MCA leader from his governing coalition, he promptly retracted his order of demolition through the Chairman of Negeri Sembilan Chinese Assembly Hall. Xiao En Group, who donated the land for the memorial garden was also threatened to cancel their business licence for erecting 'illegal structures' at the Nilai Memorial Garden. Behind the scene intervention of MCA leaders was instrumental in sheltering the various sponsors and the project and helping them weather through the red tape posed by the bureaucrats within the local,

state and federal authorities. Nevertheless, the statement of Zainuddin provoked strong condemnation by leaders of various Chinese associations as well as Chinese politicians from both sides of the political divide. Their discourse will be analysed in the subsequent section.

Comparing the Narratives: Reclaiming National Belonging

The initial commemorative text written for the 1995 commemoration used by MCCMCJO emphasised the cruelty of the Japanese soldiers and the immensity of sufferings inflicted upon the local Chinese community during the occupation. The text depicted graphically and in detail the pogrom of Chinese by the Japanese soldiers when they assumed total control over the Malayan peninsula and Singapore:

> Many defenceless people were massacred in various ways - beheaded, gunned down, buried alive, drowned, tortured, burnt, raped, enslaved, starved - this happened not just to strong young adults but even to babies. Corpses scattered all over the place, piercing cries reverberated to the sky.
>
> (MCCMCJO 2004: 31)

It described the heartbreaking situation many family members of these victims were left to face. The text referred to the deaths and suffering of this generation as symbolising the sharing of the ups and downs of the fate of the country. Victims of *sook ching* were eulogised for their persistence, non-submission, righteousness and sacrifice. It affirmed that they contributed to the country's economic prosperity and social development while alive and then paid with their lives for the country's survival. In other words, through the trauma and death of a substantial proportion of the community, the fate of the community became an integral part of the nation and its history.

According to the minutes of the first meeting of the organising committee in May 1995, the 'war dead' within the Chinese community to be commemorated included

three categories (MCCMCJO 2004: 21):

1) Those volunteers returned in 1939 to China as truck drivers and mechanics who were martyred.
2) Those who were killed by the Japanese throughout the occupation.
3) The fallen heroes among the anti-Japanese resistance forces.

The commemorative text in 1995, on the other hand, focuses on the extent of the loss of lives and suffering of the Chinese community under Japanese rule. Those who participated in the anti-Japanese resistance were not mentioned at all. Apparently, when the organisers sought unofficial opinion on the organisation of the commemoration, the Ministry of Home Affairs gave the green light but cautioned against mentioning the MCP. This may be the reason why the role of the Chinese community in the anti-Japanese resistance was not highlighted. Doing so would inevitably make references to the MPAJA and hence the MCP.

If that is the case, however, the committee seemed to have grown bolder over the years. In the commemorative text used in 1999, specific locations at which the massacres took place were mentioned. This time, two out of the five paragraphs referred to the bravery, resourcefulness and martyrdom of the anti-Japanese resistance movement, specifically the MPAJA and Dalforce. These fallen heroes were referred to as the pride of the community and the 'backbone of the nation'.

As a whole, the MCCMCJO emphasised the traumatic experiences of the civilian Chinese community at large without negating the role of the community in anti-Japanese resistance. Its Other is the non-repentant, extreme right-wing socio-political forces in Japan which persistently downplayed the criminal elements of its military invasion.

Gecinta, on the other hand, is concerned with highlighting those who sacrificed their lives fighting against the Japanese. It focused on the role of anti-Japanese resistance forces during this period. This is understandable given the direct and significant relevance of the event commemorated by the 9-1 Martyrs' Grave to the MPAJA. The rehabilitation project of the tomb brought together those who identified with the anti-colonial role played by the leftist social movement in Malaysian

political history. The sentiment underlying the energy and engagements to build the Nilai Peace Memorial Garden may be summarised succinctly by the statement of Tan Kai Hee, the consultant and sponsor of Gecinta, in the foreword of the publication documenting the controversies surrounding the construction of the peace garden:

> The history of the anti-Japanese struggle in Malaya is written with the blood of the people of all races. Unfortunately, not only is this history overlooked, it is subject to wrong interpretation. .. The patriotic sentiment of these forefathers should not be doubted; their brave struggle – risking the fate of decapitation, bloodshed, loss of lives – laid the foundation for the independence, freedom and democracy of the country.
>
> (Gecinta 2007: 12)

In his preface, Tan made a point to mention the multiracial nature of anti-Japanese resistance, naming the MPAJA, the Malay Regiment, Force 136 and Dalforce (Gecinta 2007: 12). The inscription on the Malayan Anti-Japanese Heroes Monument is done in five languages: Mandarin, English, Malay, Tamil and Japanese.

The concept of patriotism is given a central place in the discourse articulated by Gecinta. Incidentally, the name Gecinta in Mandarin is literally Patriotism Working Committee (爱国工委会). As mentioned above, Gecinta named September 1 as 'Loyal Souls' Day'. Tan expressed the wish of Gecinta that the Malayan Anti-Japanese Hero Monument commemorating fallen heroes of various races in the Nilai Peace Memorial Garden be accepted and understood as a symbol of patriotism. He hoped that a communalist perspective would not colour the historical assessment of the significance of the anti-Japanese struggle. In the words of the executive secretary of Gecinta, Tan Ka Hock, the contribution of the MCP to anti-Japanese resistance should be acknowledged, and that they should not be wronged for their act of patriotism (抗日有功，爱国无罪！ Gecinta 2007: 17).

Controversies over the War Monuments in Nilai Memorial Peace Garden

The critical remarks of the Information Minister, Zainuddin Maidin, against the War Monument in Nilai Memorial Peace Garden had unexpectedly stirred up strong popular reactions on a united front across political divide from the Chinese community, starting with some leaders of Chinese-dominated political parties of the governing coalition, *Barisan Nasional* (BN). In fact, quite a number of MCA national leaders were present and even officiated at successive commemorative activities organised at the site of the war monuments.

The Deputy President of the MCA and Health Minister then, Chua Soi Lek, intervened by speaking to the Negeri Sembilan Chief Minister privately, advising the latter against demolishing the monument. This led to a prompt 'correction' of allegedly distorted reporting by the Chief Minister, who clarified that he only mentioned that new buildings were not allowed on land demarcated for burial, or else he would order the local authorities to demolish it. He did not make the correction on his own but did it through a press conference called by the President of Negeri Sembilan Chinese Assembly Hall. Following a routine cabinet meeting, Zainuddin declared to the press that he did not deny the presence of non-communist elements in the MPAJA. He stated that he had explained to Chua that what he said was based on the memoirs of Chin Peng and that Chua had accepted his explanation.

In their criticisms of Zainuddin's remarks, most of the MCA leaders emphasised that the MPAJA should not be equated with the MCP and that many of those who participated in the MPAJA were *not* communists. Lim Si Pin, the deputy youth chief of the Gerakan Party, another Chinese-dominated component party of BN, was one of the rare ones who openly acknowledged MCP's role in the anti-Japanese resistance (Gecinta 2007: 81-83).

The responses of opposition party leaders who spoke in public against Zainuddin again reflected a spectrum of positions in terms of the emphasis of their argument. They were mainly ethnic Chinese, except for Dzulkifli Ahmad, the then director of

the research centre of the Islamic Party, PAS, known for his liberal views. Dzulkifli urged the public to be open-minded in re-evaluating history and acknowledge the contribution of the leftist fighters towards the independence struggle. While some other Malay politicians whose appreciation of the role of MPAJA and MCP may differ from that of Zainuddin, they did not go out of their way to make their opinion heard.

Compared with the overwhelming objection to Zainuddin's statement from the Chinese politicians, there were fewer Malay voices in public support of Zainuddin besides Mohamad Hasan. The politically controlled Malay mainstream media published a few opinion pieces to that effect.

The position of a youth leader of a local UMNO branch in Negeri Sembilan, Abdul Halim Lokman, was published in the leading Malay newspaper of the country, *Utusan Malaysia*, on January 5 2007. His view is probably representative of those who are critical of the construction of the war monument. Abdul Halim noted that there was the September 1 'Hero' cenotaph as well as the monument in remembrance of heroes in the Malayan movement opposing the Japanese occupation. With regard to the September 1 cenotaph, he asked rhetorically whether those 18 leaders of the MPAJA, mostly MCP leaders, should be remembered by society as 'heroes'. He felt that given the fact that the MCP had also killed a lot of innocent people after WWII, they should not be remembered as heroes. In addition, he stated that the MPAJA was formed not really to defend Malaya as homeland but because of the anti-Japanese sentiment among the Chinese community in view of the Sino-Japanese war in China and the bad treatment of the Japanese towards the Chinese during occupation. He also questioned the rationale of building a second monument, given that there is already the *Tugu Negara*. He expressed concern that this may enable Chin Peng and other CPM members also to claim to be heroes in the context of the monument. He specified that his position did not mean to deny the contribution of the Chinese people towards independence and national development.

Many Chinese associations and federative bodies of Chinese associations issued public statements condemning the remarks made by Zainuddin. Notable are

the emphases of the presidents of influential associations such as Hua Zong and KLSCAH[18], who were careful to use the safe argument that the MPAJA should not be equated with MCP and that their patriotic acts and sacrifices should be appreciated and acknowledged.

The Federation of Youth Sections of Clan Associations in Malaysia (马来西亚乡青总团联谊会) regrouping 15 youth sections of Chinese clan associations in Malaysia appeared to be more candid. They expressed their concern that the Chinese community, while appearing to be defending the role of the MPAJA, seemed to have sidelined the contribution of the MCP in the same brush (Gecinta 2007: 61). They pointed out that the MCP and MPAJA were multiracial in their composition, that the Chinese community should not be 'over-sensitive' to avoid acknowledging the MCP. They also asked rhetorically whether only a minister has the right to interpret history (p. 60). In their words,

> Even though the MCP is hated (sic) in the textbooks of our country and not recognised by the government, but does this mean that their contributions to anti-Japanese resistance should be erased? Not everybody has the courage to take up arms to fight the Japanese, ready to sacrifice his/her life; why do we deny the contribution of the MCP? We don't have to distinguish among the anti-Japanese heroes; we should pay respect to all brave anti-colonial fighters! In fact, anti-Japanese heroes include all races and parties in our country: the MCP, the Kuomintang, Malays, Indonesians, Chinese, Indians, the British, etc.
>
> (Gecinta 2007: 62)

The MCCMCJO, without exception, issued a press statement criticising the 'racialisation' of the anti-Japanese history of the country. Reiterating the multi-racial composition of anti-Japanese resistance forces, their statement urged the prime minister to sack Zainuddin for his irresponsible remarks, deemed as detrimental to national unity and the international reputation of Malaysia (Gecinta 2007: 66). The executive secretary of the committee, Tan Choong Cheng, stressed that the MCP was then a legal organisation and had done no wrong in fighting the Japanese fascism. He

said that it was not wrong to erect monument to commemorate the role of the MCP in anti-Japanese resistance as it was based on historical fact (Gecinta 2007: 63).

In response to the controversies, the MCCMCJO organised a panel discussion on the subject of anti-Japanese resistance history. During the forum, Lee Yip Lim, a historian researcher from the Centre for Malaysian Chinese Studies, made an assessment of the MPAJA. He suggested that the MPAJA made three historical contributions through their struggle. They were: educating and raising the people's political consciousness, joining the worldwide anti-Fascist war resistance and forming the first people-initiated, pan-Malayan anti-colonial organisation under extremely difficult conditions, deemed a historically and politically significant achievement. On the other hand, Lee also listed three historical limitations of the MPAJA: limited military capacity to pose a serious threat to the Japanese troops; failure to materialise its objective of setting up a democratic republic; and lastly, the lack of sophistication to overcome its over-dependence on the Chinese community and racial prejudices to reach out to the Indian and Malay communities. Two other speakers emphasised the differentiated relationships of the Japanese regime with the different races, which led to the present disagreements over historical interpretation of the subject. This contradiction in historical memories and deadlock could only be resolved if people could rise above the historical conditions not of their own making. They felt that opponents to the monument were not against the MPAJA, but rather, were anti-communist.

Conclusions

We have examined the politics of WWII commemoration, which unravels the considerable gap between the Chinese community and the Malay-dominated political regime concerning their historical memories of the Japanese occupation. It is clear that the role of the MCP lies at the heart of the dispute.

In this respect, many retired servicemen in the army and police forces, especially in the Special Branch appear to exert considerable weight. While the historical role

of the MPAJA and the MCP in the anti-Japanese resistance is incontestable, a more rational appreciation of the facts is hampered by the contentious anti-colonial armed struggle waged by the MCP from 1948. When the peace treaty was signed between the Malaysian and Thai governments and the MCP in 1989, some of the senior police cadres in the Special Branch, such as the late CC Too who was the head of psychological warfare for 27 years, reportedly refused to witness the event (Wong 2009).

But the contention may not be confined merely to the period of the armed insurrection of the MCP. Even though the Sino-Malay violent conflicts during the interregnum period did not feature prominently in the discursive exchange in the public sphere, the incidents were emphasised in the then officially endorsed history textbooks. As we have noted, the official narratives of national history in the secondary school history textbooks emphasised a Malay-dominated perspective of this historical episode. The influence of such an underlying attitude cannot be ignored in seeking explanations as to why the commemoration of the MPAJA's role in anti-Japanese resistance provoked strong reactions from the Malay-dominated authorities.

This inability to rise above historical context and give room for differentiated appreciation of the events by the authorities concerned only contributed to the heightening of an ethnicised perception of WWII, rather than fostering a more balanced and comprehensive understanding of the events. This camouflages considerable diversity and ambiguity in the appreciation of the communist past of the country within both the Chinese and Malay communities. Through the lack of discernment and rational historical assessment, Zainuddin had unwittingly stirred up a hornet's nest and missed an opportunity to let go gradually the baggage of history. Despite the signature of the peace accord, the refusal of the government to allow Chin Peng to reside in or even to visit Malaysia and his subsequent failed legal battle to challenge the government decision lead one to ponder as to whether the anti-Communist war has really ended, or has been prolonged virtually through the battle over the historical memory of the nation.

Notes

1 Primary information for this article was collected by examining the documentary publications produced by the two key organisations, the MCCMCJO and Gecinta, newspaper cuttings, and interviews and conversations with the leaders of these committees.

2 This does not deny the fragmented, even conflictual nature of such memory within the Chinese community itself as it depends on individual or family experience, which is positioned contingently during the historical events.

3 For further discussions and analysis on this issue in East Asian countries refer to the special volume of *American Asian Review* in 2003, Volume XXI, No 4, which includes the article of Cheah (2003).

4 This figure was stated in the speech of the Deputy Minister of Home Affairs, Ong Ka Ting, at the press conference in July 1995 to launch the commemorative activities in conjunction with the 50th anniversary of the end of WWII (MCCMCJO 2004: 26).

5 Cheah (1983: 23) put the estimated figure as between 6,000 and 40,000, quoting Japanese and Chinese sources, but Lee Kuan Yew mentioned in an interview that in Singapore alone, estimates of the dead range between 50,000 to 100,000. The local Chinese community puts the estimation at 100,000 throughout Malaya, including Singapore. This excludes those who died as casualties of the war, forced labour and circumstances other than the *sook ching* operations during the Japanese occupation (MCCMCJO 2004: 13).

6 These local actions of the MPAJA were carried out without the authorisation of the Central Committee of the MCP. In addition, a Malaysian historian Collin Abraham (2006) stated that, 'some of the more serious allegations of "atrocities" in Johore were in fact perpetrated by groups other than the MCP' (p. xli) and that 'there is some mention in the literature of the Japanese having recruited a "fighting unit" of ex-KMT bandits who were partly instrumental in starting the conflict between the Malays and the MCP in Johore just before and soon after the Japanese surrender.' (p. xxxviii)

7 It should be noted that non-Malay indigenous groups and East Malaysians also felt marginalised in official historical narratives that exhibited incremental Malay bias.

8 From time to time, lamentations articulated in the line of 'I love Malaysia, but does Malaysia love me?' surfaced in the Mandarin medium public sphere (Hou 2002: 221-232).

9 The role of MPAJA in anti-Japanese resistance was also acknowledged among other groups in a short paragraph in the 2004 edition of Form Five textbook (p. 58).

10 This bias has been removed in the latest version of Form Four secondary history textbook published in 2019, which adopts a more objective and factual approach in the narration

of the historical reality during the Japanese occupation, acknowledges the bravery of two well-known non-Malay individuals who had contributed notably to anti-Japanese resistance, and recognises the role of MPAJA as the 'biggest anti-Japanese movement' (p. 75).

11 The four pioneering Chinese associations which formed the first working committee to organise commemorative activities were: the youth section of Selangor and Federal Territory Hainan Association (雪隆海南会馆), the youth section of the Federation of Hokkien Associations of Malaysia (马来西亚福建社团联合会), Malaysia Chinese Culture Society (马来西亚华人文化协会) and Huazi Resource and Research Centre Bhd (华社资料研究中心). The committee was named Working Committee for Commemorative Activities of the 50th Anniversary of the End of Pacific War (太平洋战争结束50周年纪念系列活动工委会). Huazi Resource and Research Centre Bhd was renamed Centre for Malaysian Chinese Studies (华社研究中心) in 1996.

12 At the initial stage, the four associations sought in vain the support of the Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall to take the lead, whose president was not in favour of the initiative. It was only at the last minute that SCAH sought to be part of the organising committee, whose request was refused, though its representative was allowed to participate in the commemoration ceremony (MCCMCJO 2004: 26-28; Wu 2006).

13 Ong Ka Ting was then a member of the Central Committee of the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), a member party of the governing coalition, *Barisan Nasional* (BN). He subsequently became the Vice-President of the MCA and then its President between 2003 and 2008. Between 1999 and 2008, he was also the Minister for the Ministry of Housing and Local Government.

14 My English translation of the name tries to reflect as closely as possible the meaning as conveyed by the Chinese name of the committee. The English translated name, as appears in a 2006 publication sponsored by the committee, is 'Working Committee in Commemoration of the Malaysian Fellowmen Sacrificed during the Japanese Occupation'. In 2010, the committee was renamed as the Malayan WWII History Society (马来亚二战历史研究会).

15 The mass grave at the Hokkien Cemetery in Sungai Besi was located too close to the main road. The lack of space posed logistical challenges to accommodate the gathering of a large number of people for the commemorative activities. The committee decided in 2005 to adjust the position of the grave slightly. Human remains scattered around the grave were gathered and cremated, and reburied according to traditional rituals. During the exhumation around the mass grave, a second broken memorial tombstone was unearthed. On the memorial slab was engraved: Tomb In Memory of Male and Female Overseas Compatriots of the Chinese Republic who died a Dreadful Dead (紀念中華民

國男女僑胞慘死墳). The inscription on the existing tombstone was: Tomb In Memory of Male and Female Overseas Compatriots of the Chinese Republic who were Martyred (紀念中華民國男女僑胞殉難墓). The broken one was apparently the original, which was replaced by the existing one. The committee deliberated and decided to reinstate the inscription of the older version, which they believed reflected more authentically the historical reality (Wu 2006: 198-200).

16 Tang Lian was formally registered in 1991. It was subsequently renamed as the Federation of Chinese Associations Malaysia (马来西亚中华大会堂总会) in 1997 (acronym 华总Hua Zong). For internal dynamics between MCCMCJO and Tang Lian over the organisation of the WWII commemoration and seeking wartime compensation from the Japanese government, see Wu (2006).

17 See footnote no. 16.

18 In 2006, Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall was renamed Kuala Lumpur and Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall.

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