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# Shanghai Connection: The Construction and Collapse of the Comintern Network in East and Southeast Asia

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As East and Southeast Asia's communist parties, founded between 1920 and 1930, strove to promote communism regionally from the 1920s to the 1930s, they were linked in an international network of communist movements formed under the aegis of the Third International (Comintern). This essay focuses on the activities of the Comintern's regional headquarters in Shanghai after the Comintern had established the Far Eastern Bureau in Shanghai in 1926 and the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat in 1927. These two organizations, charged with supervising local communist movements in East and Southeast Asia, allocated funds, dispatched couriers and agents, and received local communists who wanted to go to Moscow. Thus, the Comintern built and maintained a complex East and Southeast Asian liaison network of agents and couriers who developed critical links with the Shanghai regional headquarters staff, and liaison officers in the local communist movements who acted as the nodes of the network. Intriguingly for the operation of the vast liaison network, among those who played crucial roles were regional facilitators who could speak European and local languages, were familiar with regional situations, and knew their contact persons. By carefully charting the structure of the network, tracing its links, which could be forged or snapped, and identifying its nodes, which could emerge or vanish, this essay provides an original account of how the Comintern network emerged in the late 1920s and how it collapsed in 1931.

**Keywords:** political underground, Third International (Comintern), Shanghai, network, East and Southeast Asian history

Nowadays, especially after the end of the Cold War, communism has lost its appeal as revolutionary thought. Although there are several communist regimes still in existence, nobody except the most committed communists imagines that a communist revolution is possible or historically inevitable. But in the 1920s and 1930s, communism was one of the major political ideologies that inspired revolutionary movements all over the world.

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The success of the Russian Revolution in 1917 was so impressive that those who were inspired by this first successful communist revolution tried to create their own revolutions in their countries.

In East and Southeast Asia, communism was received with enthusiasm by young intellectuals who wanted to liberate their countries from colonial rule or tried to solve social and economical inequalities by way of communist revolutions. They taught communism to laborers and peasants at night schools or by distributing leaflets, and mobilized them to go on strikes and demonstrations. They organized labor unions, peasant associations, and communist institutions. The first communist party in East and Southeast Asia was the Communist Association of the Indies, which was established in the Dutch East Indies in 1920 (and renamed the Communist Party of Indonesia in 1924). The next year the Chinese Communist Party was established, followed in 1922 by the Japanese Communist Party. In 1930, four communist parties were established in Southeast Asia: the Indochinese Communist Party, the Siamese Communist Party, the Malayan Communist Party, and the Philippine Communist Party.

Local communist movements in East and Southeast Asia were led by these communist parties, labor unions, and peasant associations, but there was another important dimension to the communist movements in the 1920s and 1930s. The local parties were linked in a network of international and/or regional communist movements under the aegis of the Third International (Comintern). Moreover, local communists frequently sought to promote communism regionally or to help neighboring movements. While there are a number of studies on country-based communist movements, studies of the international or regional communist movement in East and Southeast Asia in the 1920s and 1930s are not as well done, except for several pioneering works on such topics as the regional and international liaisons of the Malayan Communist Party (Cheah 1992; Hara 2009), those of the Indochinese Communist Party (Goscha 1999; Kurihara 2005), and the Comintern's activities in Asia (McKnight 2002). But these works do not reveal clearly how the regional and international liaison networks in East and Southeast Asia were constructed and maintained, and how they collapsed.

This paper describes the international and regional communist movement in East and Southeast Asia in the late 1920s and early 1930s, focusing mainly on activities of the regional headquarters of the Comintern in Shanghai. In 1926 the Comintern established the Far Eastern Bureau (FEB) in Shanghai, followed by the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat (PPTUS) in 1927. These two organizations were in charge of supervising local communist movements in East and Southeast Asia, allocating funds, dispatching couriers and agents, and receiving local communists who tried to go to Moscow. To conduct these works, it was crucial to construct and maintain a liaison network in the

region. Construction and maintenance of this liaison network was done by agents and couriers who had contacts both with staff of the regional headquarters in Shanghai and with liaison officers in local communist movements. The network of the international and regional communist movements in East and Southeast Asia in the 1920s and 1930s consisted of links between agents, couriers, the regional headquarters' staff in Shanghai, and local liaison officers acting as nodes. This paper shows how this international and regional network was constructed in the late 1920s, how it was maintained, and finally how it collapsed in 1931. Those who played important roles in the construction and maintenance of the liaison network in the region were regional facilitators who could speak both European and local languages and knew regional situations and contact persons. In June 1931 an FEB liaison officer in Shanghai and other regional facilitators were arrested simultaneously, and this roundup caused the collapse of the network.

## I Regional Headquarters in Shanghai

The Comintern was established in Moscow in 1919, two years after the Russian Revolution. The Comintern was in charge of supervising communist movements all over the world. Supervision meant the recognition of the establishment of a communist party in each country or colony, approval of personnel appointments in each communist party, allocation of funds for communist movements, dispatching of agents, distribution of directives, receiving and training of communists from other countries, and so on. These activities were conducted through liaisons between Moscow and communist movements in each country (Kurihara 2005, 3, 20–21). The organization that constructed, operated, and maintained these liaisons was the OMS (Otdel Mezhdunarodnykh Svyazey, Department of International Communication), established within the Comintern in 1921. OMS “conducted the clandestine activities of the Comintern abroad, including the distribution of confidential directives and propaganda material, the forging of passports and identity papers for overseas agents and the implementation of espionage operations” (McDermott and Agnew 1996, 22). The activities of the Comintern, especially clandestine activities abroad, were heavily dependent on liaisons operated and maintained by OMS, but it was not easy to maintain liaisons between Moscow and distant places.

The fact that East and Southeast Asian regions were so distant from Moscow led to the establishment of the Far Eastern Bureau of the Comintern in Shanghai as a regional headquarters to facilitate liaison. FEB was set up in 1926, and its original mission was to supervise communist movements in China, Japan, and Korea. But by 1930 its jurisdiction had expanded to Taiwan, French Indochina, the Dutch East Indies, British Malaya,

and the Philippine islands (Kurihara 2005, 57).

There was another organization in Shanghai that was also in charge of supervising communist movements in East and Southeast Asia. It was the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat, established in 1927. PPTUS was under the Profintern (Red International of Labor Unions), and its mission was supporting and promoting labor union movements in China, Japan, Korea, India, and Southeast Asia (McKnight 2002, 104–105).

Although FEB and PPTUS were formally separate organizations, most of their personnel and activities overlapped, so that regional headquarters in Shanghai in fact consisted of these two organizations (SMP Files: D2527/45; Kurihara 2005, 58). A liaison network was constructed from these regional headquarters in Shanghai both with communist movements in East and Southeast Asia and with the Comintern Central in Moscow. In this way, Shanghai became the main arena or hub for regional network making. But why Shanghai?

## II Why Shanghai?

David McKnight has identified three reasons why Shanghai was chosen as the place in which to locate the Far Eastern Bureau. The first was the availability of legal protection, the second was that Shanghai was equipped with modern communication systems, and the third was the existence of a large international community (McKnight 2002, 101).

Legal protection was greatly enabled by the existence of extraterritoriality. During the 1920s and 1930s, 14 states could exercise this right in Shanghai: Britain, the United States, Belgium, Brazil, Denmark, France, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland (*All About Shanghai* [1934] 1986, 22). The reason why extraterritoriality mattered was that most staff of the Far Eastern Bureau and the PPTUS were Westerners, who, in case of arrest, could claim such privilege and right.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Shanghai was already well equipped not only with modern communication systems but also with other infrastructure. Radio and cable communications as well as postal services were available and reliable, and thus a person in Shanghai could send and receive messages to and from all over the world (*ibid.*, 97–101). Foreign and Chinese banks had offices in Shanghai. Not only international bank transfers, but also remittances to and from East and Southeast Asia through Chinese local banks and money changers were possible (*ibid.*, 105). As for other infrastructure, gas and gaslights were available from 1865, electric lights from 1882, and waterworks from 1883 (*ibid.*, 29–32). All of this made life in Shanghai “modern” and comfortable, and also promoted economic activities there. Shanghai was one of the largest trading centers in the world

**Table 1** Foreigners in Shanghai (1930 Census)

Nationality	International Settlement	External Roads Areas	French Concession	Total
Japanese	12,788	5,690	318	18,796
British	4,606	1,615	2,228	8,449
Russian	3,113	374	3,879	7,366
American	1,145	463	1,541	3,149
Indian (British)	1,758	84		1,842
Portuguese	847	485	267	1,599
German	524	309	597	1,430
French	159	39	1,208	1,406
Tonkinese (French)			941	941
Filipino	356	31		387
Danish	143	43	164	350
Polish	159	28	156	343
Italian	168	29	123	320
Spanish	116	32	73	221
Swiss	93	32	81	206
Dutch	42	40	108	190
Greek	109	12	64	185
Norwegian	84	20	69	173
Korean	139	12		151
Czecho-Slovakian	88	12	39	139
Austrian	64	24	44	132
Swedish	44	43	31	118
Belgian	25	2	61	88

Source: *All About Shanghai* ([1934] 1986, 36)

at this time, and its metropolitan character made it an eminently suitable place for the activities of communists. As a trading center, Shanghai was a hub for flows of money and people, and it was relatively easy to hide fund remittances and movements of agents and couriers in the city.

In 1934, Shanghai was the sixth-largest city in the world and the second-largest in Asia (after Tokyo). Its estimated total population in 1930 was 3,144,805, predominantly Chinese. But there were also a considerable number of foreigners living in the city; in 1930, foreigners totaled 58,607 (Takahashi and Furumaya 1995, 21–22). As shown in Table 1, the foreigners were of various ethnicities (nationalities); and this variety was useful for the communist movements. The activists engaged in communist movements in East and Southeast Asia were also diverse: Chinese, Japanese, Tonkinese, Annamese, Cochinchinese, Javanese, Filipino, Korean, Taiwanese, Indian, Russian, Ukrainian, American, French, British, German, and other Westerners. The ethnic diversity and cosmopolitanism of Shanghai offered these activists not only the opportunity to be at the center of these movements, but also safe houses.

In addition to the above three points raised by McKnight, there were two more factors that were critical in making Shanghai the center of the communist movement in East and Southeast Asia. The first was its geographic position and accessibility. Since Shanghai is located at the mouth of the Yangtze River, it is a center of maritime—primarily river and coastal—transportation. This was much truer in the 1920s and 1930s than it is today. Steamships connected the city with various ports in East and Southeast Asia and beyond on a regular basis. A guidebook published in 1934 described the situation as follows:

Where next? To the traveller, Shanghai offers a unique advantage; the entire world, literally, is open for his selection. He can go to Europe by going West, or he can go to Europe by going East, with distances, time, and cost showing but slight variation. It may be an exaggeration to call Shanghai the “centre of world” but it looks very much like it on a travel map.

A trip to Europe may be made to the West by sea through the Suez Canal or by train through Siberia and Russia; to the East by sea across the Pacific Ocean, overland across the United States or Canada and across the Atlantic, or entirely sea through the Panama Canal. (*All About Shanghai* [1934] 1986, 195)

Furthermore, around 1930 there were no passport or visa requirements for visiting Shanghai (Sergeant 1991, 2). Agents, couriers, and native communists in East and Southeast Asia could visit and leave Shanghai by sea or by land with almost no restrictions.

The second, and final, point was the division of municipalities. In the 1920s and 1930s, there were three sections in Shanghai: the International Settlement, the French Concession, and the Chinese Municipality. Each section had its own administrative body and its own police force, and the territories controlled by each police force were similarly divided along administrative lines. There was no restriction on movements between the three sections, leading to the creation of gray zones within and between these divisions. A gray zone was a place where a certain degree of ambiguity existed in law enforcement and administrative control; in Shanghai, the division of police territories and the freedom of passage generated such gray zones. Because the existence of these zones was an obstacle to policing,<sup>1)</sup> it was a boon for political activism and communist movements. For example, the Chinese Communist Party was established within the French Concession in 1921,<sup>2)</sup> and despite suppression by the Kuomintang government in 1927, the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party remained in Shanghai until 1933 (Stranahan 1998, 151). When Leftists held their meetings, they did so at a house whose front door

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1) One reason why Chinese police could not keep order was the existence of the International Settlement (Wakeman 1996, 8).

2) The French Concession played an important role in the founding of the party. The Provisional Government of Korea was also established in the French Concession in 1919.

opened onto the International Settlement but whose other side faced the Chinese Municipality. In case of a police raid from one side, they could escape through one door to the other, from one administrative zone to another (Nishizato 1977, 86–87).

With its extraterritoriality, modern infrastructure, international communities, accessibility to and from other places, and division of administrations, Shanghai became the hub of the international and regional communist network in East and Southeast Asia. The network was promoted by the regional headquarters in Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s. Liaisons were established between FEB and PPTUS in Shanghai and local communist organizations, such as communist parties, communist youth associations, labor unions, and peasants associations, and also the Comintern Central in Moscow. How were these liaisons made?

### III The Creation of “Liaison Networks” in East and Southeast Asia

When a network is quantitatively or theoretically analyzed, its nodes and links tend to be treated as being similar or interchangeable. But if we want to understand how and why a certain political network is constructed or generated, we need to carefully analyze the personality and character of each node, the ways used to create links among nodes, and the purposes of the political network. And this was true of the “liaison network” constructed by the Comintern in East and Southeast Asia in the 1920s and 1930s.

Liaison making was not a unidirectional activity radiating from Shanghai. Communist parties, labor unions, and other communistic organizations in East and Southeast Asia that wanted to establish contact with Moscow for the purpose of getting directives, obtaining approval of appointed personnel and party missions, and gaining access to funds also tried to construct liaisons with Shanghai. Initial contacts with the regional headquarters in Shanghai or with communist organizations in the region were undertaken by agents dispatched from Shanghai to communist organizations in East and Southeast Asia or vice versa. One question here is how these agents were able to obtain information about contact addresses or persons.

First, information was provided to agents by the Comintern in Moscow. In the 1920s and 1930s, there were East and Southeast Asian students in Moscow universities.<sup>3)</sup> When they went back to their own countries, they were given relevant information. For example, the Japanese communist Sadachika Nabeyama (鍋山貞親) was shown photographs

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3) They were Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese, Indochinese, Filipino, and Malay (mainly Indonesian) (Kurihara 2005, 56–57, 81–86).

of an agent in Shanghai and provided a contact address there by the Comintern in Moscow before he went back to Japan via Shanghai. Nabeyama proceeded to that address in Shanghai and met with the agent (Tachibana 1983, 178).

The other way to do liaison work was to utilize existing regional links. In the 1920s and 1930s, these regional connections were provided by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which had its own links with communist movements in the Philippines, British Malaya, Indochina, and Siam. The CCP had sent its party members to supervise or do organizing work in the above areas and in turn provided safe houses for political exiles in China. When Nguyen Ai Quoc (阮爱国), who cooperated with the regional headquarters in Shanghai, was in Hong Kong and tried to establish contact with communist movements in British Malaya and Siam in 1930, he asked the CCP to provide him with an introductory letter (Kurihara 2005, 55–56).

The existence of the Central Committee of CCP in Shanghai until the early 1930s was also an important factor in the CCP's playing a bridging role between the regional headquarters of the Comintern in Shanghai and communist movements in East and Southeast Asia. To take another example: in 1929, the Japanese communist Manabu Sano (佐野学) went to Shanghai after attending the Sixth Congress of the Comintern in Moscow. When he arrived in Shanghai, he called the phone number provided by Moscow but could not get any reply. Then he went to the address he had been provided, but again nobody was there. Now at a loss, he went to the antique shop that he remembered had been a contact point of the CCP Central and left a memo there requesting contact. Four days later, he achieved contact with the CCP and met Zhou Enlai (周恩来). Zhou arranged for him to meet a member of the regional headquarters of the Comintern in Shanghai (Tachibana 1983, 320–322).

Once liaisons were established, they were maintained by agents and couriers who were dispatched from and to Shanghai, and by means of mail and telegraph.

#### **IV Maintenance of Network: The Role of Couriers**

Couriers played an essential role in local communist movements because it was they who brought directives from Moscow and Shanghai and, especially, much-needed funds. In early 1931, the main route for couriers in East and Southeast Asia was from Shanghai to Rangoon via Hong Kong, Saigon, Bangkok, and Singapore. From Rangoon they reached India and beyond. From Shanghai there were also routes to Moscow via the Trans-Siberian Railway and to the United States via Japan by sea. Other than these main routes, there were several sub-routes, such as from Hong Kong to Keelung in Taiwan



**Fig. 1** The Route of Couriers in East and Southeast Asia in 1931

Source: SMP Files: D2527/45

and Manila via Amoy, from Saigon to Yunnan Province via Haiphong, and from Singapore to Batavia. From Yunnan Province, a new route to British Burma was under construction (Fig. 1) (SMP Files: D2527/45).

When a courier arrived at his destined place, he was required to make contact with a liaison officer or an agent there, but in most cases they did not know each other. So how did they meet? Richard Sorge, who was arrested in Japan in 1941 as a spy for the USSR, in his memoir explained the various—and sometimes elaborate—methods of making contact with unknown couriers or agents. According to him, both parties were informed in advance of the date and place of meeting, the other's physical appearance, and methods of achieving contact. The coded methods included the following (Sorge 2003, 53–57):

- (1) Exchanging predetermined questions and answers. For example, the question could be “Do you know the person whose name is Ram?” The answer could be “The end of that name is ‘Say,’ isn’t it?”
- (2) Showing one half of a torn business card. The other agent then showed the other half.
- (3) Showing a \$1 banknote numbered 112235. The other agent showed a \$1 banknote numbered 112236.
- (4) Bringing a book and saying, “I think this book is quite interesting. The most interesting page is . . .” The answer would be, “For me, the most interesting page is . . .” These specific pages were fixed in advance.
- (5) Going to a department store and buying a handkerchief at a certain stand. The other agent bought socks from the same stand.

- (6) Going to a restaurant and ordering a special dish. The other agent ordered another special dish. The two then talked to each other about these special dishes.
- (7) Having a unique pipe in hand at a restaurant. The contact had a big cigar. When the two agents noticed each other, they started smoking at the same time.
- (8) Reading a newspaper at a restaurant and folding it in a unique way when the other agent arrived.
- (9) Using a newspaper advertisement to make initial contact and deciding on the place and time to meet.
- (10) Directly calling the hotel where the other agent was staying.

The above methods were utilized for making contact with couriers. For example, when Nabeyama tried to make contact with an agent in Shanghai, he was instructed by this agent that a courier would come to Kinza, in Tokyo, at a certain date and time. Nabeyama was also told that this courier would have an English magazine in his hand and would bring funds allocated to Japan. After he returned to Japan, Nabeyama went to Kinza at the time stated by the Shanghai agent, and he found a foreigner who actually had an English magazine in hand. He made contact with this courier and was given \$2,000. This courier was a consul of some Latin American embassy in Shanghai (Tachibana 1983, 178–179).

Another example was an agent who was dispatched to Singapore from Shanghai to establish contact with a member of the Malayan Communist Party in 1931. Before the agent went to Singapore, he met Nguyen Ai Quoc in Hong Kong and asked him how to contact local communists in Singapore. Upon arrival in Singapore on April 27, 1931, the agent rented an office and waited for local communists to seek him out. On May 15, a letter written in invisible ink was sent by Nguyen Ai Quoc from Hong Kong to the Malayan Communist Party Central. The letter instructed the liaison officer of the Malayan Communist Party to go to the office of the agent. On May 19, the liaison officer met the agent at the latter's office (WO106/5814).

By using these or other methods, the international and regional communist network in East and Southeast Asia promoted by the regional headquarters in Shanghai was established and maintained by couriers with staff in Shanghai and with liaison officers in local communist organizations. But in order to understand not only the maintenance, but also the construction, of this network, we should consider one more factor: the role of “regional facilitators” or human hubs.

## V Regional Facilitators as Hubs

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, when FEB and PPTUS in Shanghai tried to establish their own network in East and Southeast Asia, regional facilitators played crucial roles in both constructing and maintaining the network. The regional headquarters in Shanghai relied on regional facilitators because of their skills and abilities, which were in part determined by the nature of the communist network in East and Southeast Asia, the ethnic composition of the staff in the regional headquarters in Shanghai, and the circumstances under which local communist movements were conducted. What were these skills and abilities?

The first and most important ability was language skills. The international and regional communist movements in East and Southeast Asia were not monolingual by nature. Languages used in communist movements in the region included not only Chinese (along with Chinese topolects) but also Javanese, Malay, Vietnamese, Japanese, Korean, and other local languages, along with English, French, Dutch, German, and Russian. These languages can further be classified into three categories: Western, regional Asian, and local.

Western languages—English, French, German, Russian, and Dutch—were used in communist movements both within and beyond East and Southeast Asia. They were essential for making contact with Western comrades who came to East and Southeast Asia as staff in the regional headquarters in Shanghai or couriers and agents. Some of these languages were also used as regional *lingua franca* among local communists in East and Southeast Asia. For example, some Chinese and Indochinese communists could communicate with each other in French—not only because they had been to France as students, laborers, or soldiers (only Indochinese) in the second and third decades of the twentieth century, but also because in French Indochina there were schools teaching French.

The second category, regional Asian languages, consisted of East and Southeast Asian languages that could connect local communist movements in the region. The languages that played such bridging roles were Chinese (including its dialects) and Malay. Chinese—especially its dialects, such as Cantonese, Hokkien, Teochew, Hainanese, and others—was essential for gaining access to regional links made by ethnic Chinese communists. Malay was useful for communist movements among Malays who were in British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies.

The third category, local languages, was used only within each domestic communist movement in East and Southeast Asia. Languages under this category were Japanese, Korean, Javanese, Vietnamese, Tagalog, and other local languages.

To be a regional facilitator in international and regional communist movements, it was essential to be acquainted with (though with varying degrees of proficiency) several languages under the different categories. These multilingual regional facilitators were crucial for the regional headquarters in Shanghai because they were responsible for constructing and maintaining the regional network in East and Southeast Asia. No staff in the regional headquarters could understand local languages in East and, especially, Southeast Asia. Takashi Tachibana has pointed out that the languages used in FEB were Russian, English, and German, and Japanese communists always had trouble making contact with staff in Shanghai because there were very few Japanese communists who could speak Russian or English and there were no staff in Shanghai who could speak Japanese (Tachibana 1983, 140–141). McKnight also pointed out that there were staff who could speak only Russian (McKnight 2002, 120). Moreover, the ethnic composition of staff in the regional headquarters was completely Western. In early 1931 there were 12 or 13 Western staff in the regional headquarters, and they hired Chinese, Japanese, Taiwanese, and Korean translators for their activities (SMP Files: D2527/45). In this situation, it was necessary to recruit local comrades who could speak local, Western, and/or Asian languages, so that the regional headquarters in Shanghai could construct and maintain its network in linguistically diverse East and Southeast Asia.

But having multilinguistic ability alone was not enough to make one a regional facilitator. In the 1920s and 1930s, communist movements in East and Southeast Asia operated under severe conditions. States and colonial governments in the region, considering communist movements to be threats to their rule, tightly monitored and suppressed their activities. Thus, to conduct underground work successfully, it was crucial for the communists to have knowledge and skill on how to conceal their real identities, penetrate other countries, make secret contacts with other comrades, elude surveillance and arrest, and so on. Such knowledge and skill could be obtained only through actual experience of underground activities in the region.

Comrades who had been involved in communist movements not only in their own country but also in neighboring countries gained some ability in the languages used in these movements, and they forged links with local communists in the region. Moreover, they were acquainted with the situations faced by local communist movements. In the course of their careers, therefore, these comrades became regional hubs in the communist movements of East and Southeast Asia. The availability of these comrades as regional facilitators was crucial for the regional headquarters in Shanghai in making, maintaining, and reconstructing its regional network.

For example, when the Shanghai regional headquarters' links with communist movements were disconnected as a result of severe crackdowns by the police in each state or

colony, or when the regional headquarters tried to expand its liaisons in the region, it had to rely on links and knowledge provided by regional facilitators, who could also be dispatched as agents to the state or region.

Around 1930, several regional facilitators were available for constructing and maintaining the regional network promoted by the regional headquarters in Shanghai. They were Tan Malaka, Teo Yuen Foo (張然和), and especially Nguyen Ai Quoc.

Tan Malaka<sup>4</sup> was a famous Javanese communist in the 1920s and 1930s. He traveled between the Dutch East Indies, British Malaya, the Philippines, and China and could speak Indonesian, Javanese, Dutch, English, German, French, Thai, Tagalog, and Chinese (Mandarin, Cantonese, and Hokkien). He insisted on cooperation among revolutionary movements in Asia, especially among those operating in the Dutch East Indies, American Philippines, and British Malaya. In 1931, when he was in Shanghai, the regional headquarters had a plan to send him to Rangoon as an agent to set up a liaison center there. This liaison center would be a connecting point between India and the Dutch East Indies (McVey 2006, 223; SMP Files: D2527/45).

Teo Yuen Foo was a former member of the Indonesian Communist Party and took part in the uprising against Dutch rule in Java in 1926. After the failure of the uprising, in 1927 he went to Shanghai to study. He could speak Chinese, English, Malay, and Javanese. He was recruited by Nguyen Ai Quoc as an agent because of his language skills and experience in the region. He was dispatched to Southeast Asia in 1931 by the regional headquarters in Shanghai, with the mission of setting up the Dutch East Indies Bureau and then establishing a liaison between it and the Far Eastern Bureau in Shanghai (Yong 1997, 163; Goscha 1999, 83).

Nguyen Ai Quoc was undoubtedly one of the most famous Asian communists in the 1920s and 1930s, with a reputation rivaling—if not surpassing—that of Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong (毛沢東). “Nguyen Ai Quoc” was one of the aliases used by Nguyen Sinh Cung in his revolutionary career. In 1945 he became the first president of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam under the name of Ho Chi Minh. He was involved in communist movements in French Indochina, France, Moscow, Siam, Southern China, and British Malaya.<sup>5</sup> He could speak Vietnamese, Chinese (Mandarin and Cantonese), French, English, Russian, and Thai. When he worked in Canton in the mid-1920s, he tried to establish liaisons among radicals who opposed colonial or semi-colonial rule in Asia. After December 1929 he was based in Hong Kong and was involved in the establishment of the Vietnamese Communist Party (renamed the Indochinese Communist Party the same

4) This account of his activities and language skills is based on his memoir translated into Japanese by Noriaki Oshikawa (Tan 1979).

5) The account of his career is based on Duiker (2000).

year), the Siamese Communist Party, and the Malayan Communist Party in 1930 as the representative of the Comintern. He was in charge of maintaining liaisons between Shanghai and communist movements in French Indochina and British Malaya (Goscha 1999, 76–82, 382; Duiker 2000, 122; Kurihara 2005, 55; SMP Files: D2527/45).

The above regional facilitators had multilingual capabilities, experience in local underground operations, and, especially in the cases of Tan Malaka and Nguyen Ai Quoc, a strong commitment to developing regional cooperation among comrades in East and Southeast Asia. They were indispensable not only for the regional network centered in Shanghai, but also for the activities conducted by the regional headquarters in Shanghai. The most important requirement for maintaining this regional network was to prevent them and staff of regional headquarters from being located and arrested by the police. But in 1931 this happened.

## VI The Collapse of the Network in 1931

In 1931, the regional headquarters in Shanghai decided to dispatch three agents to Southeast Asia: Joseph Ducroux, alias Serge Lefranc; Wong Muk Han<sup>6)</sup> (黄木涵); and Teo Yuen Foo. Ducroux's mission was to investigate communist movements in British Malaya, establish liaisons between the regional headquarters in Shanghai and the Malayan Communist Party Central, and make Singapore a liaison center for communist movements in Southeast Asia and British India. Wong was in charge of reorganizing communist movements in British Malaya, and Teo's mission was as mentioned above (Yong 1997, 99, 163; Kurihara 2005, 135; SMP Files: D2527/45).

While Teo was not identified by the British Political Intelligence Services in 1931, Ducroux, together with Wong, was detected, monitored, and finally arrested by the Special Branch in Singapore on June 1. The Special Branch in Singapore obtained contact addresses in Shanghai and Hong Kong from seized documents, and it sent these addresses to the Special Branch both in the Royal Hong Kong Police and in the Shanghai Municipal Police. Based on information sent from Singapore, Nguyen Ai Quoc was arrested in Hong Kong on June 6. Hilaire Noulens and his wife, the OMS staff in the regional headquarters in Shanghai, were arrested in Shanghai on June 15 (Onimaru 2006).

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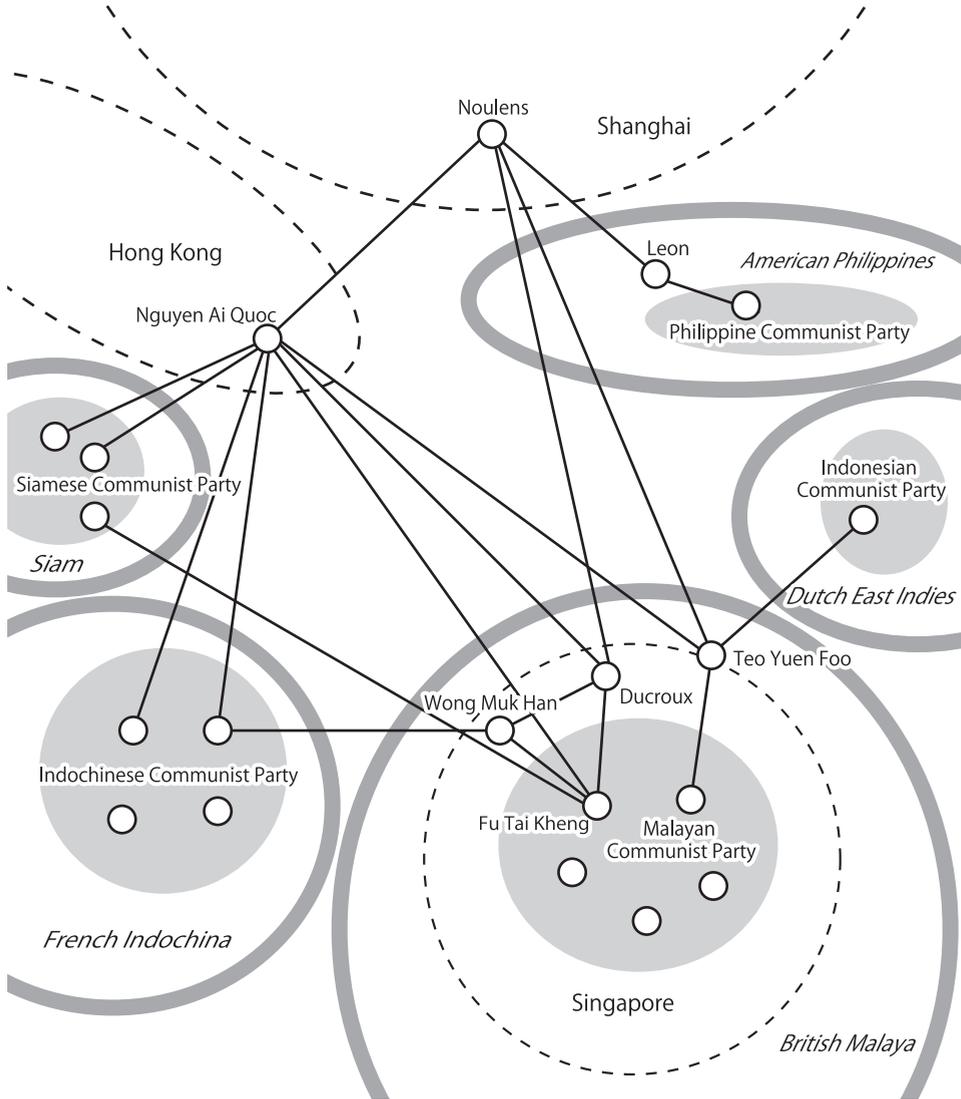
6) Wong was born on Hainan island. He promoted communism in Penang and was a leading figure in communist movements in British Malaya during the late 1920s. He was arrested by the Straits Settlements Police in September 1929 and released and deported to China the following month. He was again arrested with Ducroux on June 1, 1931. He died in 1932 from ill health during his imprisonment in Singapore (Yong 1997, 99).

After Mr. and Mrs. Noulens's arrest, the Special Branch of the Shanghai Municipal Police seized documents that Mr. Noulens kept at various houses in Shanghai. And from these documents, the Special Branch was able to piece together information not only about the purposes, methods, and current status of international and regional communist movements in China, French Indochina, British Malaya, Japan, Taiwan, Korea, and the Philippine islands, but also about communists and agents engaged in these activities. This information was shared with the relevant countries and colonies. For example, it resulted in the arrest of about 30 communist suspects in Japan (SMP Files: D2527/36; D2527/45).

At the time of the arrest of the Noulenses, Nguyen Ai Quoc, and Ducroux, there were links from Shanghai to French Indochina, Siam, and British Malaya via Nguyen Ai Quoc in Hong Kong. Ducroux had succeeded in forging a link with the liaison officer of the Malayan Communist Party. As for the Indonesian Communist Party, Teo was in charge of liaison making—but it was not clear whether he had succeeded or not. The true identity of the agent in charge of making links with the Philippine Communist Party was not known. He used the code name “Leon,” and it is known that he succeeded in contacting the Philippine Communist Party. Figure 2 shows the Shanghai-Southeast Asia liaison network in June 1931. Tan Malaka does not appear in this figure, but there was a plan to dispatch him to Rangoon for establishing links between India and Southeast Asia (SMP Files: D2527/45).

From the network point of view, the severest impact of the arrests of Mr. and Mrs. Noulens and Nguyen was the collapse of the liaison network constructed from Shanghai to communist movements in the region. Both Mr. Noulens and Nguyen were hubs in this liaison network. When they were arrested, links they had established were cut off from the liaison network in East and Southeast Asia, and this caused the collapse, or at least default, of the network. For example, the communist movement in British Malaya was completely disconnected from Shanghai as a result of the arrests of Ducroux, Nguyen, and Mr. Noulens, and it suffered from a lack of funds (*SSPIJ* Supplement No. 4 1932; Yong 1997, 164, 171).

Although Mr. Noulens and Nguyen Ai Quoc were both hubs in the network, their roles were different. The former became a hub as a liaison officer in the regional headquarters in Shanghai, and the latter became a hub as a regional facilitator. The former type of hubs could be interchangeable, because their links were attached to their roles as liaison officers and could be transferred to a successor. But the latter type of hubs were not interchangeable because they were not only hubs but also regional facilitators, and their links and abilities were acquired through their own careers in the region—so once they were no longer part of a network, it took time to find or develop a replacement.



**Fig. 2** The Comintern Network in Southeast Asia in June 1931

Notes: Dotted lines: Cities (Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Singapore)  
 Gray lines: State or colonial territories (Siam, French Indochina, American Philippines, Dutch East Indies, and British Malaya)

These differences in characteristics and roles led to differences in the impacts of Mr. Noulens' and Nguyen Ai Quoc's arrests on the network. Mr. Noulens' untimely arrests prevented them from passing on their links and documents to their successor, but this in itself was not the most salient factor in the disabling of the regional headquarters in

Shanghai. Nguyen Ai Quoc's arrest was far more critical and had a far greater impact on the collapse of the network because he was an indispensable hub, not easily replaceable within the network.

## Conclusion

In late 1920s and early 1930s, Shanghai was the center of the international and regional communist movements in East and Southeast Asia. Its extraterritoriality, its modern infrastructure, its substantial international community, its accessibility to and from other places, and its division of administrations made it the vital regional headquarters of the Comintern in Shanghai, the Far Eastern Bureau of the Comintern, and the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat. International and regional communist movements were enabled through liaisons between Shanghai and communist movements in the region. These liaisons were in turn connected mainly by agents and couriers using simple as well as sophisticated techniques for establishing contact with comrades. The international and regional communist network centered in Shanghai was crucial to the establishment of links among the staff in the regional headquarters in Shanghai, agents and couriers, and local communists in the region.

In constructing and maintaining this network, apart from couriers and agents, regional facilitators played quite important roles. Regional facilitators were comrades who had careers not only in their own countries but also in regional or international communist movements. Their experiences in and knowledge of the region, their links with local communists, and their multilinguistic abilities were indispensable for the regional headquarters in Shanghai in constructing and maintaining the regional network in East and especially Southeast Asia.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, there were several regional facilitators who cooperated with the regional headquarters in Shanghai for its activities in the region. Those facilitators were Tan Malaka, Teo Yuen Foo, and Nguyen Ai Quoc; among them, Nguyen played the most important role as a hub in the regional network.

In 1931 the international and regional network centered in Shanghai collapsed as a result of waves of arrests in Singapore, Hong Kong, and Shanghai. The arrest of Nguyen in Hong Kong, and of Mr. Noulens in Shanghai, was critical to the collapse or at least dysfunction of the network, because the removal of these hubs crippled the Asian communist and international network by simultaneously depriving it of its links to the regional headquarters of the Comintern in Shanghai and of its most important regional facilitator. The loss of Nguyen was arguably much more critical than the loss of Mr. Noulens for the

regional network and communist movements, because regional facilitators such as Nguyen were not interchangeable and it would take a lot more time and effort to find, train, and deploy another facilitator of Nguyen's talent and ability.

One might ask what similarities and differences can be detected between the network discussed in this paper, which existed almost 100 years ago, and other contemporary networks in this volume. One crucial difference is definitely to be found in the technologies available. A century ago, communists relied on steamships, railroads, telegraphs, and postal services for their communication. Nowadays all kinds of activists and politicians can use airplanes, mobile phones, and many kinds of information and communication technology to maintain rapid and regular contact with their comrades. These advanced technologies have moderated the centrality of cities in network building to some extent. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Comintern's regional network in East and Southeast Asia was constructed from Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Singapore because these major cities offered ready access to the most advanced forms of telecommunication and transportation technologies of the time. Now, certain failed or fragile states are favorable places to organize clandestine networks because network builders can avoid detection even as they construct their networks by utilizing advanced technologies. Technologies have transformed the ways of making links and the places in which to base networks. Yet there is one unchanged factor in both historical and contemporary networks, namely, the importance of human agency. Political networks, clandestine or otherwise, are organized, maintained, and transformed by human actors within them. A network often collapses when its key figures are arrested, lose interest in the network, or die. Thus, it is necessary to analyze political networks not only by utilizing the findings of network theories and analyses but also by focusing on actors who play important roles in the networks.

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