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Jason Ng Sze Chieh

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Singapore: NUS Press, 2024.

Southeast Asian Studies, 1-4 (in press).

How to Cite:

Ng, Jason Sze Chieh. Review of *The Politics of the Malayan Communist Party from 1930 to 1948* by David Lockwood. *Southeast Asian Studies*, 2026, 1-4 (in press). DOI: 10.20495/seas.br26007.

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David Lockwood. *The Politics of the Malayan Communist Party from 1930 to 1948*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2024.

Reviewed by Jason Ng Sze Chieh*

In *The Politics of the Malayan Communist Party from 1930 to 1948*, David Lockwood discusses the political history of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) from its founding to the eve of the Malayan Emergency. The author has used extensive archival material, published books, edited volumes, private papers, and newspaper articles for his research. Curiously, the list features English references only. Mandarin sources are glaringly absent given that the Communist movement in Malaya primarily used Mandarin as its main language. Although several key documents from the MCP have been used, they are British archival sources translated by analysts in the past. In fact, the author makes clear that he lacks the Chinese (and Japanese) linguistic proficiency to read the original documents, hence his dependency on British translated sources. He expresses his frustration over there being “no agreed nomenclature” for the names of MCP meetings described in the (arguably dated) translated sources—a frustration many scholars of the MCP would sympathize with. Nonetheless, the book begins with an overview of the international geopolitics surrounding Malaya in 1930, spending four-fifths of the introductory chapter on detailed developments in the Soviet Union, China, Indochina, and the Dutch East Indies. This overview is excellent as it provides an updated outlook on the era being studied. Yet only a scant four to five pages are dedicated to Malaya, focusing on the economics and the history of how Indian and Chinese laborers were imported into the colony.

The first chapter revisits the origins of the MCP by describing the Party’s ties to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) during the 1920s, the MCP’s internal growth, and its expansion into the working class and peasants. Ho Chi Minh’s influence over the nascent Party with regard to its policies and overall goal of a socialist future for Malaya is heavily emphasized. Ho’s role in shaping the MCP movement is very rarely discussed in MCP literature, and it is refreshing to see this fact being sufficiently highlighted. The author then points to the MCP’s ideological and political weaknesses as it attempted to import CCP methods into Malaya. Fascinatingly, as the author notes, its failure to court non-Chinese supporters did not destroy the

* Center for American Education, INTI International College Subang

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1277-0729>

Party.

In the next chapter, the author delves into the MCP's efforts at organizing the working class through strikes and work stoppages between the 1930s and 1940s. He rightly asserts in detail that it was the workers' demand for better wages that provided the MCP with ample ammunition to organize strikes. The strikes were a counter-hegemony process in progress, according to the author—a very valid point as the MCP was focused on labor militancy as opposed to full militancy in its political policy. Readers will appreciate the author's meticulous description of the infamous Batu Arang strike as an example of this process. No doubt, the Batu Arang incident greatly enhanced the MCP's prestige in industrial action.

It is worth noting that the author cogently illustrates the extent to which the MCP went in order to shed its "Chineseness" by adopting an anti-imperialist line that departed from its successful labor agitation activities. Lockwood then introduces the infamous MCP traitor, Lai Teck, into the picture, marking the future MCP leader as a key player. The author argues that Lai Teck united the struggling Party, provided sorely needed vision and leadership, and introduced a people's front, the Malayan version of the CCP United Front. Furthermore, the Ten Point Programme introduced under Lai Teck's leadership moderated the MCP's earlier aggressive approach. When war broke out in Europe in September 1939, the previous anti-imperialist line was re-adopted to get Malaya out of the war. This shift from the labor movement to supporting and leading the anti-Japanese Anti-Enemy Backing Up Society was a milestone for the Party, with which it succeeded in whipping up anti-Japanese sentiment. While the British dismissed the MCP's efforts, the author reminds us that this was the only Malayan national political party at the time with a large membership and good organization.

Chapter 5 may be titled "The Japanese Occupation," but the subject is thankfully not presented in "classic" fashion, i.e., a top-down narrative of broader strategic and geopolitical factors driving the invasion. Refreshingly, the author emphasizes Britain's continued repression of the MCP on the eve of the Japanese landings as proof of the Party's threat to colonial authority. He then retells the history of the 101 Special Training School and how its MCP graduates went on to form the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA). The author's defense of Lai Teck's policy of sending parts of the guerrilla army to reenter the industrial sector to agitate and disrupt production seems out of place, as it disrupts the narrative flow of the description of this period. Nonetheless, the author's continued wielding of the minimum and maximum programme theory—crystallized in the MCP's 1943 Nine Point Programme—to illustrate the ways in which the MCP could deliver its overall and immediate goals is a fresh approach to understanding the Party's objectives during the war. Interestingly, Lai Teck was credited with forestalling the MCP's confrontation with the returning British in exchange for peaceful postwar concessions. This raises questions because such concessions ran counter to postwar Britain's reconstruction needs. The author's firm defense of Lai Teck's controversial decision

is backed with copious references exonerating the man of malicious intent. Conversely, it is important to remember that any negotiated postwar agreement between the MCP and the British Empire in 1945 would firmly favor the latter with its military and technical advantages.

Chapter 6 details the concessions mentioned above plus the Nine Point Democratic Programme of 1946. In defense of Lai Teck, the author argues that the MCP's decision to give up its military force (the MPAJA) and to return to political and trade union activism was another counter-hegemonic exercise. Chapter 7 changes direction to describe the severe food shortages and the desperate conditions that led to massive strikes in major cities in Malaya, which the MCP did not participate in. The author claims these strikes were spontaneous rather than directed by the Party. On the other hand, the MCP and ex-MPAJA cadres had returned to industrial action by setting up the General Labor Union, which culminated in a massive nationwide strike in early 1947. This led to the expansion of the labor union and the MCP's influence.

In Chapter 8, the author continues his narrative of British actions to control the unruly unions. He persuasively proves the importance of the Communists by showing the extent to which the British went to reassert control by going after strikes and the unions. One critical point the author highlights is the resurrection of old laws to repress the unions. This discussion dovetails into the first disastrous attempt at creating a dependency out of the Malay principalities called the Malayan Union. But the author only rehashes previous scholarly discussions on this episode, except when he reaffirms the MCP stance via Lai Teck's views. The rest of the chapter deals with the founding of the Malayan Democratic Union and the subsequent non-communal All-Malaya Council of Joint Action's alliance with the non-aristocratic Malay coalition the *Pusat Tenaga Rakyat*, to protest the Federation's proposal to replace the Malayan Union. The book does not contain any new interpretations regarding this; the author comments on how the British, UMNO, and the sultans successfully negotiated a deal to preserve Malay prestige while sacrificing multiracial democracy.

Chapter 9 picks up where Chapter 8 left off and delves into the Party's development from 1946 onward. The meat of the chapter lies in the painstaking details of Lai Teck's abscondment and alleged betrayal of the MCP. The author accuses the Central Committee members Chin Peng and Yeung Kuo of engineering Lai Teck's fall and the MCP's eventual shift to armed insurrection. He quotes evidence for this from Chin Peng's 2003 autobiography and 1999 dialogues at Australian National University. It is fascinating that the author seems to casually dismiss Lai Teck's own intrigues since the 1930s and instead paints Lai Teck as a visionary leader who was removed because he presented an obstacle to the Party's militant faction.

The best and most original part of the book is Chapters 10 and 11. This is where the author aggressively criticizes the MCP's political ambiguity and constant wavering (due to weak leadership under Chin Peng, apparently) as well as its erroneous abandonment of the labor unions in favor of war. The author alleges that political struggles could have continued

from underground, citing the examples of the German Social Democratic Party, the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, and Mahatma Gandhi's Indian National Congress of the early twentieth century. But then in Chapter 11, he presents a (not exhaustive) list of crimes allegedly committed by Lai Teck followed by a list of responses on why he believes the accusations were unfounded. It is the author's hypothesis that Lai Teck was a convenient scapegoat for the MCP's multitude of sins. Going against decades of literature produced through meticulous research of original documents and sources by a long list of prominent scholars may be a novel approach. However, the author's attempt to point out gaps in the primary sources (such as those from British intelligence) and throw doubt over Lai Teck's poorly documented origins and early activities as reasons to doubt his complicity in sabotaging the Malayan Communist movement remains unconvincing. Regardless, it does present the disgraced former secretary-general as a political sacrificial lamb to push the Party into full militancy.

Regrettably, the five-page final chapter (plus the sober appendix defending Lai Teck) provides a somewhat unsatisfying capstone to a book that only really takes off in the last two or three chapters. It is disappointing that the author's best arguments appear only at the end of the book. The bulk of the work showcases the author's skill in crafting a meticulous and well-referenced narrative on the origins of the MCP and tracing its rise and tribulations right up to the outbreak of the Malayan Emergency. The book, according to the author, is an attempt to "recover a history" (p. 170) in which previous and current historians, including the Party's Chin Peng faction, unjustly criminalized its political leadership (meaning Lai Teck). This book will be a good reference primarily for new readers as it presents the Malayan Communist movement's development linearly and chronologically. But its last three chapters may throw readers off with the sudden thematic shift from the history of a movement to the defense of a man allegedly accused of being behind the fall of Malaya's first true national political movement.