

## **Perspectives from Taipei about Singapore's Political Development, 1955 to 1959**

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My research was focused on Taiwan's relationship with Southeast Asia during the Cold War, focusing specifically on Malaysia, Singapore and South Vietnam. The period from 1945 to 1965 was crucial for Southeast Asia as the region went through decolonization followed by a period of nation-building through various political, socio-economic, industrialization, military, and community projects. While conducting my research work in the libraries and archives in Taipei from March to May 2024 as a recipient of the "Research Grant to Assist Foreign Scholars in Chinese Studies" from the Center for Chinese Studies at the National Central Library, I found books, magazines, journals, newspapers, and declassified government records about the concerns the Kuomintang (KMT) had about the political development of Singapore from 1955 to 1959.

After the National Government moved to Taipei in December 1949, the KMT regime was concerned primarily about two issues: the survival of Taiwan as the last province of the Republic of China (ROC), and the discouragement of international recognition of the People's Republic of China (PRC) that had been proclaimed on October 1. There are numerous books and articles held in NCL and other libraries in Taiwan on the three key events centered on these two issues: the First Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1954-1955, the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1958, and the replacement of the ROC with the PRC for the "China" seat in the United Nations in 1971.

What I find intriguing is that, apart from major works such as Chen Hurng-Yu's studies of diplomatic and military relationships between the ROC and Southeast Asia, very little has been done about the nuances of Taiwan's relationship – whether political, military, cultural or economic – with Southeast Asia during the Cold War.<sup>1</sup> One possible reason is the status of the

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<sup>1</sup> 陳鴻瑜，〈中華民國與東南亞各國外交關係史〉（臺北市：鼎文書局，2004）；and 陳鴻瑜，〈揭密：冷戰時期臺灣與東南亞國家之軍事關係〉（臺北市：臺灣學生書局，2022）。

ROC in international relations. The National Government in Taipei continued to claim itself as the rightful government of the whole of China when its jurisdiction was restricted to Taiwan and several offshore islands. By the end of the First Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1955, the Dachen Islands were lost to the PRC. Martial law had also been enforced in Taiwan since 1949 with critics of the KMT vanishing, arrested or summarily executed in a period now called the “White Terror”. As John F. Copper noted, with the image of the ROC reduced to that of “a one-party, US client, garrison state”, its claims to be the legitimate government of all of China was not taken seriously internationally.<sup>2</sup>

My focus was then drawn to what Southeast Asia meant for the KMT regime in Taipei, and how it sought to influence (directly and indirectly) events in the region. For President Chiang Kai-shek and the KMT, an anticommunist Southeast Asia was added security for the survival of the ROC. The ROC could count Japan, South Korea, Thailand and the Philippines as its allies since Taipei had diplomatic relations with these four states. Taiwan was excluded from negotiations that led to the Manila Pact in August 1954 which resulted in the formation of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), the Geneva Conference that led to the partition of Vietnam in July 1954, and the Bandung Conference of new Asian and African states in April 1955. In recent years, Lin Hsiao-Ting and James Lin have shown how Taiwan remained actively involved in Southeast Asian affairs – particularly in South Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Indonesia.<sup>3</sup> By 1955, southern Vietnam had become the Republic of Vietnam, and both Malaya and Singapore were moving forward with the decolonization process. Due to the length of this working paper, I will focus on Taipei’s interest in Singapore.

It will be useful here to give a very brief overview of Singapore’s modern history. The British East India Company (EIC) had established a trading post on the island of Singapore in 1819. In 1867 the government of the colony was transferred from the EIC to London. Large numbers of Chinese and Indians arrived in Singapore to work, trade or settle down in the new colony, which served as a port for commodities from the Malayan hinterland. Singapore was

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<sup>2</sup> John F. Copper, *The Taiwan Political Miracle: Essays on Political Development, Elections and Foreign Relations* (Lanham: East Asia Research Institute and University Press of America, 1997), p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> 林孝庭,《台海·冷戰·蔣介石：解密檔案中消失的台灣史 1949-1988》(臺北市：聯經出版，2015)，頁 267-306； and James Lin, ‘Martyrs of Development: Taiwanese Agrarian Development and Vietnam, 1959-1975’, *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review*, No. 33, 2019, pp. 53-83.

governed as part of the Straits Settlements which was itself a part of British Malaya.<sup>4</sup> Singapore fell to the Japanese in February 1942 and remained under Japanese Occupation until August 1945. Between 15 August 1945 and 31 March 1946, British Malaya was placed under a single British Military Administration (BMA). With the end of the BMA, the political situation changed in British Malaya. Singapore was cut off from the rest of Malaya and became a separate Crown Colony. This upset not only nationalists in Malaya and Singapore, but also the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) which had plans to remove the British and set up a “People’s Democratic Republic of Malaya”. When members of the MCP murdered European planters in 1948, the British colonial authorities responded by declaring an Emergency in Malaya on 16 June (followed by Singapore a week later), with British troops, supported by Australian, New Zealander and local forces, fighting communist rebels in the jungles of Malaya until 1960.

From Taipei’s perspective, while the National Government had no problems with the decolonization process, it wanted to ensure that the regimes of newly independent states were, at the very least, non-communist. These regimes should not only reject the PRC, but also any diplomatic, political, economic or cultural overtures and exchanges with Beijing. President Chiang and the KMT were extremely skeptical about any communist outreach to non-communists based on their experiences on the Chinese mainland before 1949. President Chiang and the KMT promoted any agenda or movement that resisted communism. While there were many references in books, journals and newspapers about how the ROC would “reclaim the mainland” (反攻大陸) from the Chinese communists, this cause was part of a larger policy of “opposing communism and resisting the Soviet Union” (反共抗俄).

Xiaoning Lu wrote that it was “national policy” in “opposing communism and resisting the Soviet Union” as Taiwan prepared itself to “counterattack the mainland”.<sup>5</sup>

Further insight can be gleaned from President Chiang himself. In his book *Soviet Russia in China*, published to commemorate his seventieth birthday in 1957, Chiang wrote about four

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<sup>4</sup> Before the Japanese invasion on 7 December 1941, British Malaya comprised the Federated Malay States (Selangor, Perak, Negri Sembilan, and Pahang), the Unfederated Malay States (Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan, Terengganu, and Johor) and the Straits Settlements (Penang, Malacca, and Singapore).

<sup>5</sup> Xiaoning Lu, *Moulding the Socialist Subject: Cinema and Chinese Modernity (1949-1966)* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), p. 16.

ways the communists would “create” the circumstances for a revolution in a non-communist state and overthrow the existing government. First, they could “start a civil war” by promoting the formation of a communist party that would carry out infiltration and subversion activities before starting an armed insurrection. Second, they could pose as neutralists (for example in wars of independence against colonial powers) to reap material benefits. Third, they could use “volunteers” to take part in wars and other conflicts against non-communist states (as the Chinese did during the Korean War). Fourth, the communists could dispatch regular troops for war on foreign soil, which was the last resort.<sup>6</sup>

Looking through the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) held at Academia Historica and the Archives of the Institute of Modern History at Academia Sinica until the early 1950s, it is evident that Singapore mattered little to the KMT regime except for issues concerning the Chinese community in the British colony. There were reports about individuals who had run afoul of the law in Singapore. Issues concerning events in Singapore were filed together with reports from Malaya in files with “Singapore and Malaya” (星馬 or 新馬) in the file title as if both territories were still governed as one unit.<sup>7</sup> The earliest file I can find at Academia Historica on Singapore is one that compiled newspaper clippings and MOFA internal correspondence about the planning, construction, and internal events of Nanyang University, the first institution of higher learning in Southeast Asia using Mandarin as the medium of instruction. The file began compiling news from 1953 about the purchase of land, charity drives within the Chinese community to raise funds to build the university, the groundbreaking ceremony and official opening on 15 March 1956. MOFA began to focus on the university and its activities, however, when the noted linguist, novelist and philosopher Lin Yutang unexpectedly resigned as Vice-Chancellor in 1955 before the university’s official opening. Lin disagreed with the way the university managed its programs, budgeting, and infrastructure projects. It was the circumstances which led to Lin’s resignation that caught the attention of MOFA in Taipei. The file included newspaper articles from the Singapore press about his resignation which was then noted by MOFA officials who furnished their own comments about it. The Singapore newspapers reported Lin’s allegation that the university had been taken over by the communists.

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<sup>6</sup> Chiang Kai-Shek, *Soviet Russia in China: A Summing Up at Seventy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1957), pp. 335-337.

<sup>7</sup> The Chinese name for Singapore is 新加坡 and 星加坡 (or 星嘉坡) is the older version of the name (now disused).

Another file from the MOFA archives held at Academia Historica looks at the protests by Singapore Chinese high school students against National Service in May 1954. The file contains press clippings from mainly Singapore newspapers about the protests and the response by the riot police. The MCP, who was alleged by the KMT to have had political support from the Chinese communists, were accused in Singapore of stirring up trouble by agitating these students against conscription. The students were supported by militant trade unions who were also considered by the Special Branch in Singapore (predecessor of today's Internal Security Department) to have been infiltrated by the MCP to create trouble in Singapore. The Emergency was still ongoing, and according to the Special Branch, the MCP was organizing cells groups for studying communism in Chinese schools and trade unions in Singapore. President Chiang would have seen these activities as part of the worldwide "infiltration and subversion activities" of the international communist movement.

The way the files were organized at this stage reveals how MOFA collected information, including information that was not reported in the Singapore newspapers. Newspaper clippings were sent by agents of the KMT based in Singapore. An official in MOFA would collect, study and underline key parts of these clippings. The clippings, and occasionally comments by the MOFA official, would go to the East Asia and Pacific Directorate (亞太司) where another official could bring it to the attention of the Minister or even President Chiang himself.

Of greater concern to Taipei was the organization of Singapore's first General Elections in April 1955 for a new 25-member Legislative Assembly. The British had introduced democracy in Singapore with two elections in 1948 and 1951, but these were held for a very small number of seats in the former Legislative Council, and only those classified as "British subjects" could vote. In 1955, voters were automatically registered and increased to about 282,100. A new constitution for limited self-government in Singapore (usually called the Rendel Constitution which was named after the chairman of the Constitutional Commission Sir George Rendel) had been introduced in 1953. However, the 1948 and 1951 elections and the Rendel Constitution were not mentioned in the MOFA files. Clearly then, what motivated the KMT regime in Taipei was not decolonization, but the communist threat and what Taipei could do about it. The 1955 General Elections caught the attention of President Chiang and

the KMT, with newspaper clippings and internal studies on the political parties participating in the elections, focusing on the candidates, party manifestoes, and other activities.

The results of the elections shocked the British. The Progressive Party (which did well in 1948 and 1951) fared poorly while the center-left Labour Front (LF) won 10 seats. The People's Action Party (PAP) won three seats. David Marshall was appointed Singapore's first Chief Minister by the Governor on 6 April. It was an electoral defeat for the political conservatives and a victory for parties that had words such as "labor" and "people". The *Sunday Standard* in Singapore had as its headline: "votes show clear swing to the left".<sup>8</sup> The British noted the electoral success of the PAP, founded less than a year before, who won three out of the four seats it contested. Alarm bells also rang in Taipei.

Right from the beginning, Marshall's government had to deal with political unrest in Singapore. Less than a month after taking office, workers at Hock Lee Bus Company went on strike and agitated for higher pay. The strikers were supported by students from the Chinese schools. On 24 April 1955, scuffles broke out between the strikers, students and the riot police. It resulted in the deaths of 4 people, including a 16-year-old Chinese student. There are files in the Taiwanese archives that kept newspaper clippings from Singapore newspapers about the riots. It was clear from the MOFA files that the KMT regime did not see Marshall as a leader putting up a strong fight against communism. Marshall eventually resigned as Chief Minister on 7 June 1956 when a delegation he led to London failed to secure full self-government for Singapore. Marshall, however, did not disappear from the political scene in Singapore. Later that year, he was invited to be the advisor to a trade mission to the PRC that was organized by the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce – an issue that was noted by the KMT regime in the MOFA files.

Marshall's successor as Chief Minister was Lim Yew Hock, who continued as the Minister for Labor and Welfare. This meant that Lim continued to deal with striking workers and industrial disputes. Lim was fervently anticommunist and he organized mass arrests of sympathizers of the Malayan communists (or "pro-communists") through the Preservation of Public Security Ordinance (PPSO), the predecessor of today's Internal Security Act in Singapore. There was unrest in the Chinese schools as students organized sit-ins and

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<sup>8</sup> *The Sunday Standard*, 3 April 1955, p. 1.

occupied the campuses until they were flushed out by the riot police in October 1956. The unrest also spread into the streets with 13 killed over five days. In 1957, the government launched mass arrests of suspected communists across Singapore, including members of the PAP.

To check the spread of communism, the Lim Yew Hock government controlled the flow of information through publications from China into Singapore. There is an old colonial law in Singapore that had been passed in 1938 called the Undesirable Publications Ordinance. With the passage of the Undesirable Publications (Amendment) Ordinance of 1958, the Governor of Singapore was given the power to ban the importation of “all publications of foreign firms turning out subversive or undesirable literature”. In October 1958, Singapore announced restrictions on the import, sale and circulation of publications by 53 publishers in Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong and Guangzhou. Books from China were considered dangerous since all publishers and works had been placed under the control of the Chinese communists. Lim’s actions impressed the British and he eventually led a delegation to London in 1958 that successfully secured full internal self-government for Singapore. The State of Singapore Act 1958 passed by the House of Commons in London confirmed that status for Singapore in June 1959.

The legacy of overseas Chinese nationalism meant that, although Singapore had partial self-government in 1955, perceived loyalties to “China” (whether ROC or PRC) persisted. When the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce organized a trade mission to the PRC in 1956, a rival trade mission to Taiwan was organized. In early 1957, several trade associations in Taipei invited representatives from three trade associations in Singapore to visit Taiwan to witness the “progress” of industrialization in Taiwan and to discuss prospects for furthering trade between Singapore, Malaya and the ROC. The associations responded by inviting other merchants from Malaya and Singapore. A trade mission crudely named as the “Singapore-Malaya Commercial and Industrial Mission to Formosa” was quickly arranged. The Mission spent 15 days in Taiwan meeting ROC officials, visiting different associations and business companies, and holding discussions with President Chiang Kai-shek, Vice-President Chen Cheng and the Ministers of Finance and Economic Affairs. President Chiang warned the mission on 6 August about the dangers of communism and viewed it as a threat to internal security in Southeast Asia. He certainly picked the right time to say it – Malaya would become fully independent within 25 days. The Mission noted that the value of Taiwan’s

imports of goods from Malaya and Singapore had risen from S\$3,000,000 in 1951 to \$8,200,000 in 1956. It was felt that trade with Taiwan by Malaya and Singapore could be expanded, provided the twin obstacles of foreign exchange and shipping were tackled.

From Taipei's point of view, the Trade Mission was an important public relations exercise in its political and ideological struggle against the PRC. President Chiang and the KMT regime acknowledged the trouble taken to organize a Trade Mission to Taiwan as several merchants in Malaya and Singapore had pulled out at the last moment due to political pressures and what Taipei considered to be the "anti-KMT sentiments" of Tunku Abdul Rahman, Chief Minister of Malaya. The KMT regime, however, noted that the Trade Mission did not include any KMT members, and that Taiwan needed to import more rubber from Malaya and export more sugar and tea to Malaya and Singapore. The KMT regime saw the importance of maintaining trade links with Malaya and Singapore. President Chiang even invited the overseas Chinese to invest in Taiwan and members of the Mission stressed that better and more regular shipping between Taiwan and Malaya and Singapore should be encouraged to expand trade. However, the trade with Taiwan by Malaya and Singapore remained small. Several members of the Mission even contemplated the formation of an electric tramways company in Taipei, but the Executive Yuan decided not to rush into the project as it required time to study the situation in Taipei, and the costs of building an electric tramway system.<sup>9</sup>

Despite rounding up communists and pro-communists around the island, the Lim Yew Hock government ran into political trouble in early 1959. Due to internal squabbles, the LF had split. Lim and his supporters founded the Singapore People's Alliance (SPA) in November 1958. On 15 February 1959, at a pre-election rally in Singapore, Toh Chin Chye, Chairman of the PAP, claimed that the Americans had given M\$700,000 to the SPA. The PAP accused the SPA of being funded by the Americans. The person who allegedly collected the money was Chew Swee Kee, the Minister of Education, who resigned from the Assembly on 3 March. Lim Yew Hock organized a Commission of Inquiry on 4 March so that he and the party could distance themselves from Chew.

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<sup>9</sup> The details and activities of the trade mission can be found in 星馬考察團在臺灣，《星馬考察團在臺灣》（新加坡：大成圖書雜誌出版社，1957）。



Unfortunately, this allegation came at a time when the electorate in Singapore was going to the polls on 30 May to elect the first self-governing Singapore administration. Toh's claim was politically devastating to the SPA. The Commission began its hearing on 6 April and concluded its work on 18 May, which was right in the middle of the election campaign. Chew admitted that he had received a total of M\$700,000 on two occasions. He also admitted the party knew all about the transactions. According to Fong Sip Chee, a PAP legislator from 1963 to 1988, "this was a fatal statement for the SPA".<sup>10</sup> Historian Joey Long, however, noted in his 2002 article that, after extensive research in the United States, he found that "neither the US government or the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] in particular were involved in making the M\$700,000 contribution to Education Minister Chew".<sup>11</sup> Long believed that it was the Taiwanese who had given Chew the money, and that "this indicates that Taiwanese interests may have played a larger role in this turbulent period of Singapore's history than scholars have so far assumed".<sup>12</sup> A diary entry of President Chiang on 2 June 1959 reveals the role played by the KMT through the ROC Minister of Foreign Affairs George Yeh during the General Elections when he said "只知其為執政黨，而不研究其內容實情，是否值得援助與能否收效，緊憑葉公超之主觀關係，而不察其真偽虛實，甚至成為一個騙局，可知官僚政客之不知責任與不可再信".<sup>13</sup>

The revelations caused the SPA to perform dismally at the polls, winning four of the 51 seats at stake. On the other hand, the PAP emerged victorious with 43 seats. Lee Kuan Yew was appointed Prime Minister, a position that he would retain until 1990. President Chiang and the KMT were deeply suspicious of the PAP because the party had members who were deemed to be "pro-communists" by the Lim Yew Hock government. The PAP had an image of working with the communists or even pro-communist largely because it had absorbed leftist movements and leaders into the party. Its manifesto at its founding in 1954, however, showed that it was anti-colonial and non-communist.<sup>14</sup> Its 1959 election manifesto dealt more

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<sup>10</sup> Fong Sip Chee, *The PAP Story: The Pioneering Years, November 1954 – April 1968* (Singapore: Times Periodicals, c.1979), p. 70.

<sup>11</sup> Joey Long, 'The Chew Swee Kee Affair Revisited: Querying the American Involvement in Singapore', *South East Asia Research*, Vol. 10, No. 2, July 2002, pp. 238-239.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.239.

<sup>13</sup> 呂芳上（主編），《蔣中正先生年譜長編（第十一冊）》（臺北市：國史館，2015），頁 nnn。

<sup>14</sup> Fong, *The PAP Story*, pp. 15-24.

with immediate socio-economic problems in Singapore rather than any adherence, or even reference, to communism.<sup>15</sup>

Yet, the KMT regime continued to be suspicious of the PAP. In an issue of *Free China* (自由中國), Professor Sha Hsueh-Chuen, then the Head of the Geography Department at Taiwan Provincial Normal University (now National Taiwan Normal University), argued that the PAP opposed the ROC because it was a communist party in disguise (偽裝的共產黨). His evidence included public reports from the previous Lim Yew Hock government and observations by American newspapers such as the *New York Times*. He also pointed out that the new PAP government had cancelled a planned visit by 33 Chinese teachers in Singapore to Taiwan and claimed that about 30 films from Taiwan and Hong Kong were suddenly banned by new government.<sup>16</sup>

The observations by Taipei on the early political developments in Singapore tells us that instead of being a silent observer of what was going on in Southeast Asia, the ROC on Taiwan was very concerned about the state of communism in the region. Having lost the civil war and the Chinese mainland to the Chinese communists, President Chiang and the KMT in Taiwan were cautious – perhaps paranoid – about reported (or alleged) communist activities in the region. In the case of Singapore, President Chiang and the KMT expressed concern about potential political instability in the British colony as it headed towards full self-government because of communist infiltration and subversion activities. They hoped for an anticommunist regime in Singapore after 1955 and became even more concerned after the PAP won the 1959 General Elections.

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<sup>15</sup> People's Action Party, *The Tasks Ahead: PAP's Five-Year Plan, 1959-1964* (Singapore: People's Action Party, 1959).

<sup>16</sup> 沙學浚，〈新加坡人民行動黨反對自由中國！〉，〈自由中國〉，第21卷，第1期，1959年7月1日，頁406。