THE CHINESE IN BORNEO
1942–1946

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POST-WAR events in Malaya have heavily underlined the possible results of training and arming certain groups in war-time. The Malayan story is only one manifestation of a much wider phenomenon. In order to 'win the war' the Allies picked and sponsored special groups, usually left wing, in many enemy-occupied countries. In some, such as Yugoslavia, these groups afterwards took over control. In others, such as Greece, they were unsuccessful in their efforts to do so—though how nearly they succeeded is shown in a dispatch by Field Marshal Lord Alexander.[1]

By the end of the war, Malayan resistance, predominantly Communist, was still not organized on the advanced scale of European groups. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that those who knew most about it, and about the Chinese in general, appear to have anticipated no consequences from encouraging the formation of these groups and temporarily giving them supreme power. For example, Dr Victor Purcell, in his recent and scholarly study of the Chinese in Malaya,[2] gives a full account of the war-time and immediately post-war position, but stated that the guerilla forces were successfully demobilized and disarmed; he suggested no possibility that they would give serious trouble. Colonel Spencer Chapman's *The Jungle is Neutral*[3] is a masterpiece not only of war adventure and personal heroism, but also of 'non-realization' in regard to the forces at work among the Chinese guerillas, whom he came to know and to influence perhaps more closely than any other European. Nowhere in his book is there a glimmer of a suggestion that the jungle he at first learned so well how to neutralize had become armed and menacing.

Few have ever realized how much the failure to observe what was taking place has actively contributed to the present Malayan situation, but a good account of the process by which the guerillas came to believe that they alone reconquered Malaya (a belief fostered by post-war honours) is given in the first issue of *Corona*.[4]

In Borneo, across the Straits from Malaya, many Chinese were armed and trained during the Japanese occupation, though owing to the difficulty

[1] *Report by the Supreme Allied Commander, Mediterranean, to Combined Chiefs of Staff: Greece*, 1944–5 (London, H.M.S.O., 6 May 1949).
[2] Victor Purcell, *The Chinese in Malaya* (London, Oxford University Press for the Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1948).
[3] London, Chatto & Windus, 1948.
[4] 'Disorders in Malaya', *Corona : the Journal of His Majesty's Colonial Service*, vol. 1, no. 1 (February 1949) p. 12.

of then getting to Borneo at all the process was slower and on a smaller scale than in Malaya. The situation of the Chinese in Malaya was in many respects similar to that of the Chinese in Borneo, and especially in western Borneo, which includes the whole of Sarawak. In Borneo the Chinese are predominant as traders, middle-men, and in some areas specialized workers, e.g. in pepper planting, gold mining, and vegetable growing. In Sarawak they comprise nearly a third of the population. Educationally and in their internal organization they are usually 'ahead' of the other groups, or have been so until recently. It is instructive to compare Borneo and Malaya, therefore, while fully recognizing the many differences. One particularly important difference is that in Sarawak, and to a lesser extent in North Borneo (previously British North Borneo), the pre-war centralization of authority and the attitude of those in power, meant that persons with unpopular politics could promptly be deported, and that any form of revolutionary propaganda could virtually be excluded. In Borneo, therefore, there was no specific Communist organization when the Japanese arrived. But by the time Europeans returned, units with a vaguely Communist outlook had appeared, at least on the eastern side of the island in Dutch Borneo.

My personal knowledge of Borneo was originally gained from serving with the Oxford University Expedition to Sarawak in 1932. During 1944 I was in touch with developments there, including the results of the submarine landings and activities in command of the late Lt Col Gort Chester, D.S.O., O.B.E. During 1945 I was in command of a part of Sarawak, North Borneo, and Dutch Borneo in an area which included numerous Chinese. Since nothing has previously been put on record about this phase of the war, it is hoped that these notes may be of some value in appraising further developments.

It is convenient to define three periods when considering the Chinese in Borneo during this time: (1) up to 1944; (2) organized resistance under General MacArthur's direction; (3) demobilization and after.

UP TO 1944

When the Japanese took over control the Chinese in general favoured passive resistance. Although there were some extremely unpleasant incidents, there was nothing on the scale of the massacres of Chinese which took place in Singapore and elsewhere. There was a tendency for some of the Chinese to move away from their usual centres of commerce on the coast or the main rivers and to establish themselves as peasant farmers in less accessible and conspicuous places. This meant a considerable curtailment of trading activity and the effect of the war on the Japanese economy emphasized this as the occupation continued. By the second half of 1944 the Americans had taken Moratai in the Halmaheras, which enabled them to bomb shipping at the Labuan naval base (in Brunei Bay)

and to harry the coast-line. By the end of 1944 Japanese shipping was practically at a standstill except for purely local craft, and these usually moved at night to avoid the attention of aircraft.

From the first, however, some of the more thoughtful Chinese had adopted a more positively hostile attitude, at least mentally—since for the most part there was no means by which they could implement this by action. In Kuching a series of camps had been established at Batu Lintang for civilian internees and prisoners of war. Many Chinese helped the unfortunate Europeans there, sometimes at grave personal risk. The doyen of the Sarawak Chinese community, Mr Ong Tiang Swee, himself took part in operations to smuggle materials and news into camps. (He was awarded the O.B.E. for his valuable work, and a number of other Chinese in Kuching have received similar awards.) The Japanese became increasingly concerned about the attitude of the local Chinese, and it was partly as a result of this that the Sarawak Secretary for Chinese Affairs, Mr F. Selous, was one of those to meet his death during internment.

Another great camp, but confined to prisoners of war (mostly Australians), was established at Sandakan in North Borneo. This was eventually the scene of the terrible Sandakan 'death march', when the Japanese moved the prisoners southward in such a way that only a handful survived. We know, however, that on this march and before it the Chinese and local native peoples rendered great assistance to the prisoners, and such assistance made possible the remarkable escape to the Philippines of Major Rex Blow, D.S.O. (who subsequently joined in the 1945 guerilla activities in Borneo), and others.

Very few Chinese can be said to have done anything voluntarily or readily to help the Japanese. Whereas a number of Dayaks, Indians, and others have been tried, and in some cases executed, for treacherous wartime activities, very few cases have been brought against Chinese.

During all this time the Chinese were without any appreciable outside stimulation or organization, such as quite early became available in Malaya. However, Colonel Chester established an intelligence system in North Borneo in 1943–4. Though this was at first on a very small scale, and his party were hunted day and night (several of them losing their lives in the process) they inspired new hope in the Chinese and others in North Borneo. At this stage the intention was only to build up an allied intelligence service for the then virtually unknown situation in Borneo, but it was difficult to control the enthusiasm engendered by news that white men had returned. This led to what was from the Chinese point of view a major 'incident' of the Japanese occupation. The Jesselton Rising in October 1943 was connected with the rather vague group of guerillas led by a Filipino in the Philippine Tawi Tawi Islands (due east of North Borneo). The exact relation to Colonel Chester's activities, which were conspicuous in 1944, is not clear. This rising was organized largely by a Kuching-born Chinese, Kok Fen Nam, who had heard of alleged Allied activity in 1942.

A wireless set was obtained through a Chinese called Lim Keng Fatt in the Jesselton area during the latter part of 1942. Contact was made with Filipino guerillas early in 1943 and headquarters in the Jesselton area were established at the house of Lee Khum Fah fourteen miles from Jesselton. A force of about 200 was raised and $10,000 in funds, as well as much food and other help. Some weapons had been obtained from the Tawi Tawi Islands.

In the latter half of 1943, these forces learned that the Japanese were intending to take action against them. So Kok Fen Nam's forces attacked Jesselton in several parties, the majority only armed with native swords, at midnight on 9 October. Considerable areas were occupied, and about fifty Japanese are said to have been killed. On the 10th, anti-Japanese posters were displayed and all Chinese requested to fly the Chinese National flag. The guerilla organization was now termed the Mount Kinabalu Salvation Guerilla Band—Mount Kinabalu being the highest mountain in North Borneo, and playing an important part in local Chinese mythology. On the 13th the Japanese started to return to the area and on the 14th aeroplanes dropped leaflets.

In the following three months the Japanese regained control and hunted the guerillas, burning whole villages and killing or torturing innocent people. This was continued till January 1944; as late as 21 January, 176 suspected persons were executed in one batch. Kok Fen Nam, who had voluntarily given himself up in December to ease the persecution, was executed among them.

This incident has been well summarized by another Chinese, who wrote in a local paper: 'Thus ended a plucky, desperate effort, obviously foredoomed to failure, which had no effect but to make the invader throughout Borneo and Sarawak extremely nervous and suspicious, aggravated the situation, and caused increased oppression of all the inhabitants, and suffering and death to hundreds, participants and innocent alike'.

The Japanese believed, rather naturally, that the revolt had been deliberately organized from outside. From the Allied point of view the immediate effect was to hinder further development in preparation for eventual Allied landings. But the ruthless methods of the Japanese proved to Allied advantage; for many of the Chinese they killed were innocent of any complicity in the rising. They had relatives over a wide area in Borneo. And in general the news of the incident, which spread throughout the island, hardened Chinese resistance, even where it increased anxiety. To some extent the Japanese had set out in the first place to woo the Chinese; but by now they were black-listed. The Japanese regarded the Dayak and other pagan tribes with more or less contempt—a variant of the 'dirty nigger' attitude, tempered by a certain fear of going far into the interior. All they did with most of the inland people was to remove their shot-guns and to impose levies of rice and other commodities on them, often rather ineffectually. Their action towards the Chinese in North Borneo, and their

removal of shot-guns from natives, together with their generally contemptuous approach, contributed heavily to the subsequent resistance in the next stage of the war. Both the Chinese and the pagans of Borneo are proud peoples, and the Japanese in Borneo appeared to be incapable of appreciating the difference between controlling a people and humiliating them.

ORGANIZED RESISTANCE UNDER MacARTHUR'S DIRECTION

Although Colonel Chester's early and remarkably bold activities in North Borneo were, of course, part of the general war plan, the difficulties of submarine work at this distance and in these waters precluded any operation on a considerable scale until the American Air Force had established a base at Moratai and then mastery of the skies over Borneo. Up till then the war potentialities of this vast island were left practically untouched. Most of it was unknown to Allied Intelligence, and the information which we were given often proved wrong when put to the test. The large and relatively accessible east coast of Dutch Borneo had been even less examined than the British section. A few Dutch submarine sorties were made, but no permanent organization was established. Eventually development of activities in most of Dutch Borneo was largely left to Australian and British officers, including Major J. Stott, D.S.O. (who was caught and killed by the Japanese behind Balikpapan), Captain David Prentice, M.C., M.B.E., and Captain F. Blondeel, M.C. The present writer, though dropped in Sarawak, also later established his headquarters in Dutch territory.

At the beginning of 1945 the Services Reconnaissance Detachment (a branch of S.O.E. in London), the unit which was mainly responsible for guerilla operations from the Australian end, was at last able to employ aircraft of the Royal Australian Air Force. From then on this unit was able to develop rapidly in Borneo and within a short time to cover a large area. This rapid development was made possible partly by the attitude of the Chinese in the sub-coastal areas. By now these were thoroughly tired of the Japanese and prepared to go to any length to be rid of them.

In North Borneo, the effect of the ill-conceived Chinese insurrection had been to handicap the development of a Chinese guerilla force as such, and the Services Reconnaissance Detachment was obliged to rely largely on other native peoples. There was much American air bombing in North Borneo, accompanied by awful devastation. In the small sector of North Borneo of which I had personal experience, outstanding Chinese leaders emerged. Foremost of these was Miaw Sing, headman of Sipitang, a small town on the west coast of North Borneo. This gentleman, directly he had been approached by an Australian paratrooper (W/O. C. Macpherson, M.M.), organized a mixed force of Chinese and pagans, and operated with success against the Japanese in his area. He has since been decorated and is now a senior chief of the district. All the Chinese throughout this

southern corner of North Borneo were ready to help the Allies, and showed the most resolute spirit.

Just south of the North Borneo border, at the up-river village of Merapok, the Chinese headman, Mr Diow Siu Gong, became one of the best guerilla leaders. After the first Allied landings at Labuan and Brunei in June 1945, hundreds of Japanese soldiers moved north along this sub-coastal belt. Merapok was on their direct line of advance. It became a headquarters of guerilla organization, from which the Japanese were harried for weeks. Everything this Chinese headman had was freely at the disposal of all who were ready to fight or spy. Since he was quite a rich man, as well as the leading local manufacturer of alcoholic liquor, he had a good deal to offer! In mid-1945 those coming down from the interior to visit him found the most extraordinary conglomeration of irregular soldiers —an Australian, a New Zealander, fifty Chinese from four different regions of China, Malays, Javanese, Ibans (Sea Dayaks) and many Muruts and Tagals. All appeared to live and operate in harmony inspired by his dominant personality. Unfortunately, this fine man was drowned at sea while returning from Labuan after the war, shortly before he was due to be decorated by His Excellency the Governor.

The same spirit was shown in the south. On the great Rajang river in Sarawak, Major W. L. Sochon, D.S.O., relied partly on Chinese, mixed with more numerous Sea Dayaks. Over in Dutch territory, the Chinese trading groups in the interior put up an outstanding performance as nuclei for intelligence and guerilla stations. Their places are naturally situated at strategic points of trade-route intersection in peace time, each populated by perhaps a dozen Chinese proprietors. In war they automatically became nuclei for anti-Japanese activity.

One of the most important individual acts was that of Lo Hoi Hu, wife of Chinese fisherman Teo Tow Kia from Padungan, a suburb of Kuching, the Sarawak capital. She was one of several who looked after shot down airmen, at great risk to herself, and under the eyes of the numerous Japanese. A contact point for seaplane rescue was eventually successfully established on an islet some miles out to sea.

It was of course by no means always the case that the Chinese were leaders. In fact, what was impressive in much of the Borneo experience was the way in which different groups mixed and worked together. The Chinese usually have a natural reluctance to work under others, especially if the others are uneducated people from the interior; but in a number of cases they did so. Outstanding in this respect was the organization on the Sesajap and Sembakong rivers in the northern part of Dutch Borneo. (It is to be regretted that the people in Dutch territory were not normally eligible for British decorations and that the Dutch have seldom recognized these war services themselves.)

Much more might be written to illustrate the activity of the Chinese at this time. Mention must be made of a band of young men who arrived at

Ninth Australian Divisional Headquarters on Labuan in June 1945, volunteering to go anywhere and do anything. They were stationed among the hill Muruts at Long Semadoh, far up the Trusan river (Sarawak), where they did most useful work. At that time the Japanese were pushing into the interior, and indeed the last organized force of 350 Japanese were compelled to surrender up-river from Long Semadoh only at the end of October 1945.

It would be misleading to suggest that this picture is a wholly happy one. Borneo differs in important respects from Malaya in that it has a large indigenous pagan and inland population. The Sakais and related peoples of Malaya are few in number and are usually mild in disposition. Throughout all the territories of Borneo the largest element in the population is pagan. Many pagans have a traditionally aggressive temperament, which has earned them a still-surviving and no longer deserved reputation as 'the head-hunters of Borneo'. As Mr Ian Morrison has pointed out,[1] the crux of the problem in Sarawak is its plural society, which was described in a 'Note on the Development of Local Government in Sarawak' issued by H.E. the Governor, Sir Charles Arden Clarke, in 1947, and circulated to all senior Government offices. North Borneo, Brunei, and Dutch Borneo are also characterized by a plural society, defined by Sir Charles as 'a society comprising a variety of elements which differ in race, language, custom, religion and culture, and which live side by side, yet without mingling, in one political unit'. Mr Morrison has also stated that the Dayaks have 'no great love for the Chinese'. During the war there was indeed some trouble between Dayaks and Chinese, which unfortunately arose through guerilla activities. At two places on the Baram and Rajang rivers, Dayaks, excited by successful operations against the Japanese, killed some local Chinese. These incidents were on a small scale, but their psychological repercussions were wide. In this connexion it is interesting to note that the only place where a complete mixed local authority, representing all groups, has so far been established is in the Fifth Division of Sarawak, where there was no war-time inter-racial trouble of this character.

DEMOBILIZATION AND AFTER

It would be fair to say that, taking the war period as a whole, the Chinese put up a good performance in Borneo. Much of this performance was, however, negative, necessarily passive. Of course other non-Chinese groups put up fine performances too. Owing to the large numbers of pagan people the Chinese never became a dominant single armed group. There was no question of Chinese alone having 'liberated' the country: it was liberated by practically everybody in it—by outsiders at a few points, i.e. by Australians, Americans, and occasionally Dutch. Sarawak officially

[1] Ian Morrison, 'Local Self-Government in Sarawak', *Pacific Affairs*, vol. xxii, no. 2 (June 1949) p. 178.

celebrates Liberation Day on 11 September, the anniversary of the date on which the internees were released from Kuching camps; but this takes no account of the reality of human effort and suffering over the country as a whole.

There were few post-war difficulties of demobilization, which occurred almost at once. The Chinese, like everybody else, gave up their arms. Systems of war payment varied in different areas. Within the area known to me most of the Chinese refused payment; and incidentally many of the hill Muruts and Kelabits were also not interested in payment, although the Sea Dayaks attached a lot of importance, sometimes exceeding reasonable bounds, to eventual reward.

As far as can be seen, largely because resistance in Borneo was not exclusively or mainly carried out by the Chinese, the direct post-war results of guerilla fighting have been psychologically and politically slight so far as the Chinese are concerned.

SUMMARY

These notes are intended to record these events, not to attempt to draw any broad conclusions. It would be useful if we could know more of what happened in other areas of South East Asia. It would be grossly over-simplifying the matter to suggest that Malaya could have learned direct from Borneo. On the other hand it is surprising that the Europeans on the spot in Malaya did not realize more quickly what the possible consequences of their actions might be. Everybody with experience in Borneo almost instinctively recognized the result of concentrating on any one group exclusively. It is true that no other group was readily available in Malaya when the time came to organize Allied resistance more thoroughly there. On the other hand no resistance group was originally available in Borneo, though it would have been easy to have decided to organize resistance through one racial group alone, especially the Dayaks or the Chinese. Had this been done, the consequences might well have been something like those we now see in Malaya, though naturally of a different order.

Certain specific points may be stressed:

(1) It is possible, in my view, in stimulating resistance movements in such circumstances largely to avoid the political consequences, provided that aggressive action is sufficiently organized and focused on an external enemy. Even in places where there is a considerable degree of political or racial consciousness this could be temporarily submerged when the whole local danger was fully appreciated and local leadership adequately drawn on. A similar process was seen in Britain under a Coalition Government.

(2) The exploitation of the basis of the locality and not a racial or political basis is extremely important in this respect. In Borneo it was

strongly developed. It was also widely used with success in combining different elements over much of France.

(3) In my opinion the part played by resistance groups should not be unduly emphasized after the events. Also, particular care needs to be taken to give any special recognition or praise to representatives of every section of the community. Parades of heroes and public acclamation produce a confused picture in the minds of the participants, most of whom were doing an ordinary job to liberate their own land, and some of whom actually enjoyed doing it. This again applies not only to Asia, but anywhere, assuming that after the war the country wants to 'return to peaceful conditions', an assumption which is, of course, not accepted by all countries or groups.

(4) Demobilization of a regular force must be rapid and thorough and must take place very soon after the end of actual hostilities, if arrogance (and perhaps eventual banditry) are to be avoided.

Although these points do not exclusively apply to the Chinese in Borneo, it is possible to imagine circumstances in which the organization of resistance groups there could have resulted in a very different post-war development than has in fact taken place. Whether or not the general total of Chinese interests in Asia eventually becomes Communist is, in this respect, of lesser importance. The outstanding point is that in most of Borneo the future internal politics of China, whatever they may be, will not have to be considered and worked out locally against an embittered and blood-stained pattern of racial or group conflict on the spot. In Borneo, broadly speaking, the Chinese, in common with other races, lived together through the war and live now in reasonable harmony and kindliness. They can so continue.

15 June 1949

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Since writing the above paper, Mr Maxwell Hall has published through the Sarawak Press, Kuching, a colourful and moving account of the 1943 guerilla activities on the west side of North Borneo, which has been briefly referred to above. This is a major contribution to war records in South East Asia, though unfortunately there are no references or citations of sources, so that accuracy on points of detail cannot be assessed.