Mention communists, guerillas, freedom fighters, militants and ideologues and the images that leap to mind are invariably male. In Asia, it is no different, except there is an added bias of patriarchy and of a history that has, until recently, been constructed and then recounted by former colonial powers and their historians. After independence, new ‘autonomous’ national histories had to be created and national curricula constructed, with those not fitting into these narratives either omitted or marginalised. Adrianna Tan examines the case of the women warriors of the Malayan Communist Party.

The forgotten women warriors of the Malayan Communist Party

Adrianna Tan

Not surprisingly, a history - official, academic and popular - of the Malayan communists, with the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) at the core of the movement, is lacking. There is a penchant for dichotomous terms of good and evil, black and white. The conventional narrative is usually that of the ruthless Malayan Communists - typically Chinese and always male - versus the valiant and ultimately successful attempts of the colonial power and incoming national governments that saved the region from the global communist conspiracy.

If there is anything certain at all about this particular part of history, it is that the version of those defeated has been as good as airbrushed out of history, or at least heavily tweaked. In fact, the communist movement in present day Singapore and Malaysia, not to forget its hinterlands in Thailand’s Muslim south, spanned the better part of the 20th century, first overlapping with the independence movements of these countries, then fighting against the post-independence governments, before petering out two decades ago when the guerillas finally laid down their arms in 1989. Now in retirement and in their seventies or even eighties, several key figures have written books or oral history interviews, giving a voice to the lives they led, except for one book of overlapping material from other narratives exist in either academic or popular history. Research and original oral history interviews, giving a voice to the women of the Malayan Communist Party. But it is only a preliminary attempt at piecing together a coherent story about the women of the Malayan Communist Party. To my knowledge, no other narratives exist in either academic or popular history. Research and original material has been scarce and mostly in Chinese: the leading MCP researcher CC Chin and his counterparts have carried out meticulous research for decades, but settled solely on the women.3

Yet little is known about these women and the lives they led, except for one book of interviews and overlapping material from independent research about the MCP. Agnes Khoo’s groundbreaking “Life As the River Flows” (2004) is a collection of oral history interviews, giving a voice to the women of the MCP. But it is only a preliminary attempt at piecing together a coherent story about the women of the Malayan Communist Party. To my knowledge, no other narratives exist in either academic or popular history. Research and original material has been scarce and mostly in Chinese: the leading MCP researcher CC Chin and his counterparts have carried out meticulous research for decades, but seldom focused solely on the women.3

Khoo’s 16 interview partners freely discussed their lives, regrets, struggles, beliefs and hopes with the Singapore-born researcher. This preliminary narrative can hopefully open the door to a new interest in this important but often forgotten part of the contemporary history of the ‘Malay’ peninsula. It is a story about women who were invisible when they were daughters and wives in the traditional Southeast Asia of the 1930s through to the 1960s and 1970s. Invisible when they left home to live a life in the dense forests of Malaysia and Thailand and invisible again now as they find themselves on the wrong side of history - forgotten, banished, silenced by the state and by shame. In learning about their contribution to history, historians gain an understanding of some significant themes underlying this transnational struggle; while the rest of us may find some lessons from the story of female lives led bravely, harshly and sometimes brutally.
The Malayan Communist Party was formed in 1924. It gained influence and numbers in the anti-Japanese movement from 1939 to 1945, peaked as an anti-colonial independence movement from 1948 to 1959 in the Malayan Emergency, was banished to the jungles after independence from 1945 to 1948, and finally laid down their arms following the 1989 Peace Accord. Throughout these six decades, women from diverse social, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds joined the struggle.

They had different motivations. Some joined to escape poverty or oppression and sometimes violent family structures, or simply the dead-end boredom of village life. Some were highly educated intellectuals, others were illiterate. While many women from a wide variety of backgrounds joined the MCP, only a small proportion ever joined as a means of escaping family. Zhu Ning was a safe house for guerillas providing shelter and communications. By the time she was 18, her activism had already made Guo Ren Luan an informal member of the party; joining officially was a natural step for her and many of her contemporaries. She eventually went on to do high-level Party work in China for several decades, and also married a high-ranking Politburo member. The activism and social awareness in the Chinese schools of the day provided fertile breeding ground for future members of the party. Many, including the longtime leader of the party, Chen Peng (b. 1924), and his schoolmate Eng Ming Ching (b. 1924) - the hardy female member of the Politburo and leader of the 10th Battalion - began revolutionary activities as a direct result of the anti-colonial resistance popular in Chinese schools in the early 1940s.

A decade after the Japanese resistance, in early 1950s Singapore, Guo Ren Luan and her peers were involved in a similarly disinterested activism, founding associations to help poor students afford school fees and buy books, forming anti-pornography movements, and participating in student rallies, and forming the Federation of Chinese High School Unions, among others. In May 1954, hundreds of Chinese middle-school students clashed with the colonial police regarding the unpopular introduction of compulsory conscription, resulting in 26 injured and 45 students arrested. Consequently students like Guo Ren Luan found themselves with renewed anti-colonial sentiments and politically radicalised. She soon left home to avoid arrest and continued being active in the Malayan underground when the Feder-
In Malaysia and Singapore, we are familiar with Peranakan culture which has the nyonya women as head of the household. When it comes to women in history, Southeast Asia is not lacking in heroines. Elizabeth Choy is best known as Singapore's war heroine. She risked her life by smuggling medicine, messages and supplies to prisoners-of-war, and despite repeated torture, refused to break, never revealing the names of anyone she had assisted. Shamsiah also joined the 10th Regiment, the Malay wing of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP). Her life was filled with thorny obstacles. She got lost a few times in the jungle in pursuit of the armed struggle for independence. A number of studies on the communist movement in Malaya and Singapore have been published by historians, social scientists and former British Army personnel. Of late, ex-police or military personnel who fought against the communists have also published their memoirs. Yet, apart from Agnes Khoo's collection of interviews with 16 female ex-cadres of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) from the Peace Villages in southern Thailand, no comprehensive study on women's involvement in the Malayan communist movement has been attempted. While beneficial to this study, Khoo's book