

## Emergency Is Normal

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Sim Chi Yin's photographic mixed-media project, 'One Day We'll Understand', reminds us that we are living in a world shaped by emergency measures. Such measures have a long 'modern' history, and today they are freshly justified by politically motivated terrorism and random psychotic outbursts. Sim's art tells us that along with the inconveniences of new societal controls instituted as a result of contingencies, historical memories are being quietly rewritten and cultural values reshaped.

The long-term effects of the so-called 'Malayan Emergency' (1948-1960),<sup>1</sup> originally intended to protect British colonial economic interests, have been the institutionalisation of ethnic hostility as the foundation of a new nation. This ensured the alignment of the post-colonial world in western terms long after the empire retreated. From the 1920s, there was a growing labour movement disgruntled at the exploitation of the British empire. But the Malayan Communist Party, founded in 1930 under the banner of anti-imperialism, fought alongside Britain against the atrocities of Japanese imperialism starting from 1941, before returning after World War II to its original purpose of ousting the colonial British. Malayan communists consisted of both indigenous Malays and ethnic Malayan Chinese, but the British post-war agenda singled out the Malayan Chinese<sup>2</sup> (who were the more numerous and recalcitrant) to pacify Malay nationalists, and justified colonial rule by identifying anti-colonial struggle as usurpation from the outside. At Independence of Malaya in 1957, political power was defined along ethnic lines and enmity between the ethnic groups was entrenched. To this day, defences against dangerous liaisons with broken dreams and haunted memories have remained in place, and deep-rooted historical links and cultural alliances across racial lines have become taboo.

Asia's woes, regardless of our apparent economic or political success, are due to our having forgotten the original meaning of 'independence' and 'autonomy' for which our forebears fought; the era of the Cold War has blocked our views to the past. Today Asia needs historians to tell the stories of its inextricable internal ties. Many societies even require the help of ethnographers and professional academics to read their grandparents' ways of life and the particular knowledge that grew out of their own world. We are inheritors of a century of historical erasure.

The age of imperial expansion began to unravel with the First World War between European powers, and global struggles of anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism quickened their pace in battles for independence. The centenary of 1919 should remind us we are beneficiaries of historical struggles on a global scale, and that the recent decades of relative stability have been purchased at the price of unprecedented violence.

However, imperialism has not left with the lowering of flags. The aftermath of the old empires trails a long shadow behind it; each and every Asian nation seems to have unsettled scores that continue to haunt, where unpacified ghosts cry for recognition. With independence, modern Asia has fallen instead into the colonialism of ideologies. Reviewing the 20<sup>th</sup> century's political struggles, 'anti-colonial liberation' and 'national independence' had all been directed under the terms of western ideological movements. Couched in the language of 'liberation' or 'freedom', whether it be nationalist democracy, socialist revolution or communist internationalism, the ideologies of liberation have inadvertently come to mean an alignment with the political ideological framework of the modern nation-state, and always

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<sup>1</sup> 'Malayan Emergency' is the British term for the protracted guerrilla war fought between colonial British armed forces and the communist Malayan National Liberation Army.

<sup>2</sup> Malayan Chinese came from southern China; they immigrated in large numbers between mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century and WWI, to work the plantations and cultivate the border forest areas. At the beginning of the Emergency in 1948 Malaya had a population of 5.73 million, of which 2.15 million was Malayan Chinese, 38% of the total population, while ethnic Malaysians were 49% of the population. At the end of the Emergency in 1960, there were still 570,000 Malayan Chinese living in 'New Villages', a form of policed camps with control measures.

at the cost of forsaking traditional cultural alliances and abandoning historical cultural values. 'Internationalism' of both the left and the right are ultimately bound to comparable terms of modern economic production and technological acceleration, terms originally set by the imperial powers. The most sustained iniquities of empire are probably those of 'ideological colonialism', which, more often than not, were self-inflicted through ideological (and religious) conversion, and wrapped in the cloak of scientific and cultural 'progress'. Colonialism conquers not just territory but also the mind; its spoils are the victims' imaginations and aspirations, and the subjugation of other cultural histories.

From her darkroom, Sim Chi Yin releases harrowing memories and heroic sacrifices. The clear political agenda of independence for which her revolutionary grandfather and his comrades had fought during the years of the 'Malayan Emergency' was later redirected, as he discovered upon his repatriation to China. He died in the spring of 1949 in China's civil war, long after the expulsion of the Japanese invaders. The ideology of communism migrated immediately from the anti-imperialist war to battlefields of an internal civil war, before embarking on a programme of cultural conversion of the entire nation, with an arrogant disdain for China's historical culture.

In post-Independence Malaysia, the divisiveness of the ethnic-based nation-state instituted by the British Empire through the Malayan Emergency mirrors the global ideological divisiveness created by the Cold War. If Asian struggles for national independence are taken to mean the recovery from foreign domination, they have instead been guided along a path that institutes a perpetual State of Emergency through ideological divide. China, India and Korea are but obvious examples.

De-colonising the histories and cultures of Asia is important for the purpose of self-knowledge and historical identity. But more importantly it holds the promise of new paradigms of knowledge that had hitherto been marginalised by the success of western modernity.

The Digital Age now enveloping us with information obscures the fact that broad spectrums of human knowledge based on cultural intuition are rapidly being decimated while archives of digital information proliferate. The complaint of modern alienation has not been healed by more information and better control of the world. What is lost is the deep sense of connectedness with both the human and natural world that all traditional societies took for granted. Technological evolution follows its own instrumental logic while modern paradigms of thought lag behind. The more meaningless the world becomes, the less controllable the power of 'intelligent' technology appears to be.

Human intuition provides this connectedness; intuition of the world is grounded on specific cultural knowledge, with each culture finding its own particular manner of connecting with the cosmos. The well-being of 'information' in the digital age is dependent on the diversity of ways human cultures manage to transform information into meaningful knowledge – this includes 'technical knowledge' grounded in the historical memory of cumulative experience.

However, the human world is rapidly being denuded of its rich resources of local knowledge that grew out of diverse ways of life. An 'ecological disaster' in the world's cultural ecology has been created for the benefit of exploitative and narrowly focused political economic gains. To regain access to one's own history where deep knowledge resides, and unlock the terms of knowledge shut out by the modern paradigm, is perhaps the most important task of the post-colonial generations. We can look forward to the liberation of colonised knowledge as one of the greatest hopes for fresh scientific forms of the future.

Sim Chi Yin's project opens up the historical dimension buried within a personal requiem, and obliges us to confront the missing narratives surrounding a scratched photograph, a single prosthetic leg or a barrel-less pistol. Many of these fragments have been disowned and abandoned, but they remain monuments. They are bearers of ideals; hopes lost and found. Sim Chi Yin has presented us with closed archives that hold the secret of what lies beyond the politics of liberation and ideology.