

## 'Like a Concentration Camp, *lah*': Chinese Grassroots Experience of the Emergency and New Villages in British Colonial Malaya

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### Introduction<sup>2</sup>

Ethnically, the Chinese had formed a significant part of the population of the Straits Settlements and the Malay States from at least the mid-nineteenth century, when the expanding mining industry imported tens of thousands of workers. In the twentieth century, the new rubber industry also employed many Chinese workers. The Depression of the 1930s, however, led to widespread unemployment and resulted in about 150,000 rubber tappers and tin miners becoming squatters in the rural areas of colonial Malaya. The outbreak of the Second World War exacerbated the situation, pushing a further 400,000 people towards the jungle fringe as they attempted to escape starvation and political persecution by the Japanese authorities.<sup>3</sup> Taking advantage of these circumstances, the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA) built up connections with these squatter communities, which in turn supplied the MPAJA with money, food and information in return for its "protection". After the post-war outbreak of armed struggle, the Communists rebuilt their rural network through mobilizing a mass movement, known locally as *Min Yuen*. The squatters in rural areas soon came to be perceived by the British colonial authorities as a dangerous threat. To counter the growing insurgency, on 16 June 1948, the British colonial government in Malaya declared "a state of Emergency" after the murder of three European plantation managers at Sugai Siput in Perak state.

In October 1948, rural people, especially Chinese squatters living on the verge of the jungles, became the targets of a government Squatter Committee who proposed their resettlement as a way to "cut the [guerrilla] fish off from the water." This huge task only began after Lieutenant-General Harold Briggs was appointed director of operations in May 1950, charged with controlling and coordinating the removal of hundreds of thousands of people from the south to the north of the Malay Peninsula.<sup>4</sup> The Emergency, which lasted until 31 July 1960, ended up involving the forced relocation of 573,000 rural inhabitants into 480 New Villages.<sup>5</sup> Sixty years on, 450 of these villages, with over 82 percent Chinese inhabitants, still exist in Malaysia,<sup>6</sup> underlining the fact that the historical experience of mass dislocation and forced resettlement in the 1950s was largely confined to Chinese people.

The Emergency in Malaya has been widely studied, from early accounts that emphasized Cold War issues and counter-insurgency techniques through to more recent analyses of propaganda and official discourse.<sup>7</sup> Overwhelmingly, the existing historio-

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<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank Professor James Warren and Stephanie Chok for their comments on an earlier draft, and Nola Cooke for her editorial assistance and valuable suggestions in revising this research note.

<sup>3</sup> For a general background on squatters, see Kernial Singh Sandhu, "The Saga of the "Squatter" in Malaya," *Journal of Southeast Asia History*, vol. 5, no. 1 (1964): 145-153; and Anthony Short, *In Pursuit of Mountain Rats* (Singapore: Cultured Lotus, 2000), pp. 173-205.

<sup>4</sup> See "Federation plan for the elimination of the communist organisation and armed forces in Malaya (the Briggs Plan): Report by COS for Cabinet Malaya Committee," CAB 21/1681, MAL C (50)23, Appendix 24 May 1950 [henceforth "The Briggs Plan"].

<sup>5</sup> Sandhu, "The Saga of the "Squatter" in Malaya": 187.

<sup>6</sup> Malaysian Government, *New Villages Master Plan (Summary)* (Kuala Lumpur: Ministry of Housing and Local Government, 2005), pp. 2-3.

<sup>7</sup> Many academic works primarily adopt military and security perspectives, for example, Richard Clutterbuck, *The Long, Long War: The Emergency in Malaya 1948-1960* (London: Cassell, 1966) and Short, *In Pursuit of Mountain*

graphy has taken a “top down” or State-oriented approach to the subject. As a result, a vital gap remains in our understanding of the Emergency. We know little from the perspective of those hundreds of thousands of rural people, primarily Chinese, who were most directly affected by the anti-Communist campaign. These people have remained nameless and faceless, silenced and buried in official statistics or government reports.

My research attempts to extend the existing historiographic discourse on the Emergency and New Villages by introducing the perspectives and experiences of previously marginalized people. As part of my doctoral fieldwork, I visited 150 New Villages in the Malay Peninsula between June 2007 and May 2008 and conducted seventy-six oral history interviews, in Cantonese, Hokkien and Mandarin. Interviews were spread evenly between elderly male and female informants from four case study sites — Bertam Valley New Village at the Cameron Highlands, Pusing in Perak state, Tras in Pahang state and Pulau in Kelantan state.<sup>8</sup> They were structured so that interviewees began with their personal background and life story and then moved on to their experiences behind barbed wire before including their recollections and interpretations of particular events of local historical significance. These testimonies help shed new light on a period of untold hardship and trauma, and highlight the desperation as well as the resilience of those who lived through such turbulent times. Their stories also challenge state-oriented claims about the “success” of the Emergency, and of the New Villages counter-insurgency strategy at its centre, claims that can only stand by ignoring the long term systematic denial of basic human rights that was involved.

### The Emergency: A Brief Overview

On 16 June 1948, the British colonial government in Malaya declared “a state of Emergency” to counter the Communist insurgency after the murders of three European plantation managers at Sungai Siput in Perak.<sup>9</sup> In hindsight, the declaration of the Emergency led the British colonial authorities and military in Malaya into new and uncharted territory. Over the twelve-year “shooting war,” the Government reshaped its political governance in Malaya through the processes of legalization, militarization and bureaucratization. First, on the legal side, the enactment of the Emergency Regulations Ordinance, 1948, under the rubric of maintaining law and order,<sup>10</sup> gave the colonial government draconian powers. It could now search without a warrant, detain without trial, control movement on roads, and register the population. In particular, Emergency Regulations 17D, 17E and 17F invested the government with powers to detain and evict “illegal” squatters, who were either deported or arbitrarily moved into “resettlement camps.” These regulations eventually formed the basis of the policies of detention and deportation

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*Rats*. Some are concerned with political psychology and propaganda analysis, in counter-insurgency studies known as “winning hearts and minds”. See, for example, Kumar Ramakrishna, *Emergency Propaganda: The Winning of Malayan Hearts and Minds 1948-1958* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 2002) and Richard Stubbs, *Hearts and Minds in Guerrilla Warfare: The Malayan Emergency, 1948-1960* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 2004). For an intelligence perspective, see Leon Comber, *Malaya's Secret Police, 1945-60: The Role of the Special Branch in the Malayan Emergency* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asia Studies, 2008). Some personal accounts provide vivid pictures of jungle warfare, as do journalists' reports of the Emergency, such as Harry Miller, *The Communist Menace in Malaya* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1955); Richard Mier, *Shoot to Kill* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959); J. W. G Moran, *Spearhead in Malaya* (London: Peter Davies, 1959); and Barber Noel, *The War of The Running Dogs: How Malaya Defeated the Communist Guerrillas, 1948-1960* (London: Collins, 1971).

<sup>8</sup> To create a local-regional comparative database, I travelled around the Malay Peninsula to visit other New Villages in Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Kedah, Penang, Terengganu and Johor.

<sup>9</sup> For more details on the incidents, see Harry Miller, *The Communist Menace in Malaya*, pp. 82-84; Chin Peng, *Alias Chin Peng: My Side of History* (Singapore: Media Master, 2003), pp. 214-15.

<sup>10</sup> See Rhoderick Dhu Renick, Jr., “The Emergency Regulations of Malaysia: Causes and Effect,” *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, vol. 6, no. 2 (1965): 1-39.

and later, of eviction and compulsory resettlement by which many thousands of innocent families were displaced.

Secondly, the British colonial response to the Communist challenge considerably militarized Malayan society between 1948 and 1960.<sup>11</sup> In particular, the regular police force tripled in size from 9000 to 31,164 by 1952. The Emergency Regulations also enabled the British authorities to recruit three complementary local emergency forces: special constables, auxiliary police and home guards. While the special constables police reached their peak figure of 44,117 in 1953, the numbers of auxiliary police and home guards came to 86,000 in 1951 and nearly 250,000 in 1953, respectively.<sup>12</sup> After their essential basic training, these new police and other forces were used primarily for guard duty. Chinese home guard units were formed and trained in every New Village in order to perform duties such as household registration of inhabitants and visitors, assisting in the supervision of food control measures and guarding the surrounding barbed wire fences. The regular security forces were also reinforced from outside by Commonwealth troops consisting of infantry, artillery, air force and navy personnel from Britain, Nepal (Gurkha battalions), Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Rhodesia, Nyasaland, Kenya, and Uganda in the British war against the Malayan Communist insurgency.

Third, the British colonial government undertook major administrative restructuring measures to co-ordinate the civil, military and police departments under its director of operations. Once appointed head of this directorate, General Briggs proposed a radical plan, later known as the "Briggs Plan", to win the war against the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) forces and its supporters. He created a three level chain of command through three levels of committees—the Federal War Council, State and Settlement War Executive Committees and District War Executive Committees. This administrative structure was to facilitate a more effective coordination and execution of the counter-insurgency campaign against the Communist insurgency. This campaign included detaining and relocating the squatters under tight security and administrative control, thereby supposedly creating a collective feeling of security in order to win their "hearts and minds." These measures were also meant to obtain information from the locals, isolate the guerrillas from their food supplies and force them to come out of the jungle to fight against the security forces.<sup>13</sup>

The legalization, militarization and bureaucratization processes during the Emergency contributed to the emergence of a virtual police state in Malaya. These processes also legitimized and enabled the British colonial government to initiate and implement several major Emergency policies: shoot to kill, search-and-destroy, detention and banishment, population movement and control, eviction and resettlement, and food control. The rural populace, and Chinese squatters in particular, thus suddenly encountered a powerful,

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<sup>11</sup> When the Emergency was announced, the Federation of Malaya had ten troop battalions (two British, five Gurkha, and three Malays) and some 9,000 Police. But, as Clutterbuck points out, the government fighting force and the Communist fighters were approximately equal, with 4,000 riflemen for patrols and operations against the 4,000 guerrillas in the jungle in 1948. See Clutterbuck, *The Long, Long War*, pp. 42-43.

<sup>12</sup> *Federation of Malaya Annual Report*, 1948 (Kuala Lumpur: Federation of Malaya, 1948), pp. 183-84; *Federation of Malaya Annual Report*, 1951 (Kuala Lumpur: Federation of Malaya, 1951), p. 3; Short, *In Pursuit of Mountain Rats*, pp. 124-32, 293, 412. Assuming that each policeman or paramilitary had at least two dependants—and many married men would have had more—then in 1953 perhaps one in every seven or eight people among the approximately five million inhabitants of Peninsular Malaya (including the Straits Settlements) would have owed some or all of their livelihood, directly or indirectly, to the official response to the Emergency. For instance, what a Special Constable could be paid for his salary and allowance varied from state to state, between 95 and 150 dollars per month. Most Malay auxiliary police were actually "Kampong Guides" who worked on a part-time voluntary basis. Chinese New Village males between 18 and 55 could be conscripted into home guard units under the Emergency Regulations. Even though it was a compulsory obligation, some former Chinese home guard members in the Cameron Highlands told me that they had 30 dollars allowance each month for their night duty. In Kelantan, Gua Musang New Village Committee collected a certain amount from local rubber dealers to pay for its home guard unit. The wider impact of such a militarized society needs to be further studied.

<sup>13</sup> See "The Briggs Plan", CAB 21/1681, MAL C (50) 23, Appendix 24 May 1950.

modern state apparatus that affected every aspect of their daily lives. Thousands of people were detained, repatriated or resettled by the British authorities during the Emergency. The next two sections now focus on two aspects of this drastic state intrusion into the lives of ordinary Chinese, the resettlement programme and Chinese New Villages.

### The Resettlement

On 10 December 1948, the United Nations passed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. That aspirational commitment, however, had little impact on the harsh reality of forced resettlement on masses of Chinese squatters in Malaya which began just eighteen months later, after the arrival of General Briggs in May 1950. As director of operations, Briggs established standard operating procedures (SOPs) for the resettlement project.<sup>14</sup> First, a field team would be sent to conduct a preliminary survey to determine the number of squatters and villages targeted for resettlement, as well as potential resettlement camp sites. Theoretically, sites were chosen on the basis of the terrain, soil quality, water potential, employment opportunities and security. Selected sites would then be fenced in by barbed wire. Inside the enclosure, basic social amenities and security infrastructure, such as a police station, watch towers, a school, a dispensary, a community hall, piped water and electricity, were supposed to be provided. In practice, however, lack of resources (including money, staff and materials), as well as top-down pressure from the government to resettle rural populations swiftly due to security concerns, meant that proper implementation of SOPs rarely occurred, especially in the early 1950s.

The actual process and act of relocation generally took place in the following manner. Notices of relocation were handed out and explained by local field officers and the Chinese village headman to the squatters. The state governments usually allocated compensation and allowances, but these varied from place to place. On the so-called "D" day, trucks would arrive escorted by security forces and wait while squatters prepared their belongings for loading. They would then be forcefully transported to their resettlement camps. In areas designated as "bad", however, the security forces would raid at dawn, with no prior warning, to prevent squatters from fleeing. This meant the surprised villagers had just a few hours to prepare themselves, mentally and physically, for relocation. After their sudden removal, their crops and *attap* (palm thatch) houses were burnt to the ground by government soldiers so they could not be used by the Communists.

In several extreme cases, the New Villagers experienced forced relocation more than once. Tras New Village is one such case. Tras is located at the bottom of Fraser's Hill, a small resort 120 km from Kuala Lumpur, surrounded by a thick jungle area. The rural inhabitants were first rounded up in late 1950 and then attached to a hundred year old town called Tras, in Raub District, in Pahang state. On 8 October 1951, the high commissioner, Sir Henry Gurney, was ambushed and killed by Communists on his way to Fraser's Hill. One month later, the entire population (2121 people) of Tras village were sent to Ipoh Detention Camp, where they were incarcerated and interrogated from between six months and one year.<sup>15</sup> Even when they were released in batches, they were resettled to other New Villages (such as Sempalit and Sungai Chetang New Villages in Pahang) and were only allowed to return to Tras after it was declared a "white area" in the late 1950s.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> For more information, see Short, *In Pursuit of Mountain Rats*, pp. 391-415; Sandhu, "The Saga of the "Squatter" in Malaya": 159-162; and J. W. Humphrey, "Population Resettlement in Malaya," unpublished PhD Dissertation, Northwestern University, 1971, pp. 128-33.

<sup>15</sup> "Terror' Town To Be Moved," *The Straits Times*, 8 November 1951.

<sup>16</sup> Author's interview with Mr. Chai, Tras New Village, 28 November 2007. See also "Ghost Village will open again after five years," *The Straits Times*, 25 July 1956.



**Figure 1.** An image of resettlement, *The Straits Times*, 3 July 1950  
(courtesy of the National Archives of Malaysia)

For many rural people of Malaya, the Emergency did not begin, both spatially and temporally, in June 1948 but only after their displacement, relocation and resettlement. Therefore, local residents' perspectives and experiences of the Emergency in different parts of Malaya differed considerably from the standpoint of the British colonial government. Thus, for instance, local responses to resettlement demonstrate a gap between notions of "illegality" when framed by the government and by the villagers. When asked if they considered themselves "illegal occupants"—which was the official basis for their removal—one informant retorted: "Illegal? We have been farming here for decades, and suddenly the British authority came and told us we are illegal." Another old man argued they did nothing wrong and merely wished to be left alone. Another interviewee, in his eighties, pointed out that his father had in fact been encouraged by the British to set up a plantation in the area, saying, "Even though we had a TOL [Temporary Occupant License], they still forced us to move and told us it was for security reasons. We lost almost everything."<sup>17</sup>

Families were also separated. In some cases, parents who had relatives in towns or cities arranged for their children to stay with those relatives so that they could attend school. Quite a few young people escaped to the city to look for jobs, while others moved to the jungle to avoid being resettled. Some family members were separated during the resettlement process. As one grandmother recalled, "My mum carried the four of us, leaving all the stuff behind, following the crowds to get on the truck." It took months for her

<sup>17</sup> Author's interviews with Mr. Cheng, Mr. Cho, Mr. Xie, Pulau New Village, January 2008.

father, who was away on D-day, to find and join them.<sup>18</sup> When asked if any squatters refused to move, one respondent replied, “They [the British] have guns, what else can you do?”<sup>19</sup>

The colonial government sometimes also adopted a “divide and rule” strategy with respect to the resettlement communities. As one informant related, “The army painted numbers on our houses, and we were divided and resettled to different villages.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, in certain special cases, houses were labelled to ensure that villagers would be effectively dispersed during the resettlement process and not end up living together in the same New Villages. In southern Johor, many families were divided from one another when some members crossed the causeway to Singapore. The social impact on rural families and intra-migration patterns from such separations and divisions in the initial stage of the Emergency remains unexplored. Generally, frustration, fear and uncertainty characterized the experience of resettlement, as people were uprooted with little prior notice and no choice.

As one elderly man summed it up: “I was happy to know we were going to have our own farming lot from the government ... I thought we could be protected by the government and kept safe from the Communists ... I never thought life behind barbed wire could be like that.” When pressed to elaborate what “that” meant, he emphasized, “Like a concentration camp, *lah!*”<sup>21</sup>

### The New Villages

The British Government set up a large number of “resettlement camps” where Chinese squatters, officially dubbed “unknown subjects”, were relocated in order to cut off contact and potential supply routes between them and the Communists. In 1952, Sir Gerald Templer, the third high commissioner of the colony, decreed that these “resettlement camps/areas” should be termed “New Villages,” in the hope of promoting the ideology of these resettled areas as “modern” communities, places superior in their standard of living to the rural villagers’ previous “unsanitary” and “backward” dwellings.<sup>22</sup>

Generally, official British discourse described the New Villages as “safe and protected,” depicting them as symbols of “progress and modern life.” It was also asserted that, “In their new villages the former squatters are realising the benefits of proper administration. They now have facilities for education, medical and health services, communal services such as water supply and electric light, and expert assistance in proper cultivation of their crops and the conservation of the soil”.<sup>23</sup> Even though the government claimed to provide “after-care” for the villagers in the form of basic modern facilities and social welfare, life behind barbed wire was never easy. During the course of my fieldwork, the collective memories of elderly locals painted quite a different picture from the positive official view.<sup>24</sup>

Most of the local people interviewed said that the first three-to-six months of the resettlement process were the most difficult. State governments usually provided some financial assistance, although it varied in amount. Some families received up to one hundred dollars—seventy dollars as a house grant and the remaining thirty as an

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<sup>18</sup> Author’s interview with Miss Goh, Tras New Village, 25 November 2007.

<sup>19</sup> Author’s interview with Mr. Ong, Tras New Village, 21 November 2007.

<sup>20</sup> Author’s interview with Mr. Cheng, Pusing New Village, 12 April 2008.

<sup>21</sup> Author’s interview with Mr. Chen, Sempalit New Villager, 14 December 2007.

<sup>22</sup> See “Resettlement Nomenclature,” 15 March 1952, National Archive of Malaysia file no: British Advisor 93/1950. Such language was representative of the British colonial mentality at the time, which reflected their sense of moral superiority in the time of Pax Britannica. For instance, see Caroline Elkin, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain’s Gulag in Kenya* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2005).

<sup>23</sup> Federation of Malaya, *Handbook to Malaya and the Emergency* (Kuala Lumpur: Department of Information, 1956), p. 27.

<sup>24</sup> The interviews in the following section were conducted at my case study sites.

“allowance”—to assist them in setting up their new home. Little information is available now to show the extent to which resettled persons received government financial aid during the resettlement process, although some of my elderly informants certainly complained that they did not receive any financial support from the government.<sup>25</sup> In general, once the squatters arrived at their destination, they had to build their own houses on assigned lots within weeks, using whatever materials they could dismantle and salvage from their previous home. In certain remote areas, villagers were reduced to collecting branches and palm leaves from nearby jungles. While building their new houses, some slept in *attap* long-houses provided by the government as reception huts; others made do with quite basic shelter, which was little more than rickety shacks covered with *attap*.



**Figure 2. A standard plan**

(source: Ray Nyce, *Chinese New Villages in Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute, 1973), p. xlix)

In terms of basic amenities, not every New Village was well-established in the beginning. With such a large number of New Villages constructed in such a short period of time, sites generally suffered because of poor location and planning due to a lack of qualified administrative staff, money and resources. In many New Villages, key services such as drainage and other public works were only established years later. Furthermore, a

<sup>25</sup> Those who did not receive financial aid normally also did not get any removal notice from the Government. They were officially regarded as residing in “bad” areas which were liable to sudden raids and resettlement by local authority.

large number of New Villages did not have dispensaries or schools until the late 1950s. With limited public piped water, elderly people recalled having to line up for hours to haul water. Electricity was mainly directed to the police station, the community hall and, most importantly, the floodlights at the watch towers. In certain “bad” areas, fences were also electrified for security purposes.



**Figure 3. An isolated grocery store in an unidentified New Village, c. early 1950s**  
(photograph by courtesy of Wong Nam)

The layout of a standard New Village represented a unique spatial and power relationship between the colonizer and colonial subjects. The police post was located either in the centre of the New Village or else placed at a higher altitude to facilitate surveillance of the villagers and their daily activities. Other government buildings, such as community halls, schools, dispensaries, as well as shop-houses and markets, were situated close to the police station. Several watch towers sat at the edge of the village, ostensibly to protect villagers but invariably functioning as an instrument of surveillance to monitor villagers’ movements. There were two main gates, guarded by Malay auxiliary constables, who controlled the movement of people and vehicles in and out of the village. The residential areas were normally designed along horizontal and perpendicular lines in a grid pattern.

With such clear and well-confined boundaries, the British colonial authorities could watch, control and discipline their “unknown subjects” daily. State power penetrated deeply behind the barbed wire, where the relocated villagers encountered the full weight of the modern state, especially in the form of government representatives such as resettlement officers, assistant resettlement officers, Chinese affairs officers, assistant Chinese affairs officers, security forces, constables and village headmen.



**Figure 4. An aerial view of Gua Musang New Village in Kelantan  
(courtesy of Chang Wen Siong)**

Furthermore, there were various techniques of social control embedded in the formal regulation and organization of the New Villages. For instance, the colonial government implemented an innovative policy of national registration in Malaya in July 1948. Persons over twelve years old were required to register and hold identity cards (see Figure 5 over page), which bore a photograph and a thumb-print. These were constantly checked by security forces. All the households were registered and the household registration form, which listed the names, ages and occupation of family members, was to be displayed on the wall for security reasons. Each household kept a rice ration card, which allowed a purchasing quota of 2.5, 2 and 1.75 kilos of rice per week per adult male, adult female and child respectively.

In addition, two kinds of curfews were enforced. The first, gate curfews, limited residents to the confines of the village between 7 pm and 6 am, while house curfews meant villagers had to remain indoors in their home. These curfews, designed to limit villagers' movements, varied from area to area. In certain extreme cases, such as in Tanjong Malim in Perak and Permatang Tinggi in Penang, the British Government imposed 22-hour house curfews as a form of collective punishment for the villagers' "non-cooperation."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> The Tanjong Malim incident occurred on 25 March 1952. The MCP guerrillas ambushed a public works department party repairing a water pipeline and killed twelve men. For further details, see Miller, *The Communist Menace in Malaya*, pp. 206-08; In the case of Permatang Tinggi, a Chinese resettlement officer was murdered in a coffee shop at the New Village in August 1952. See Victor Purcell, *Malaya: Communist or Free?* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1954), pp. 90-91.

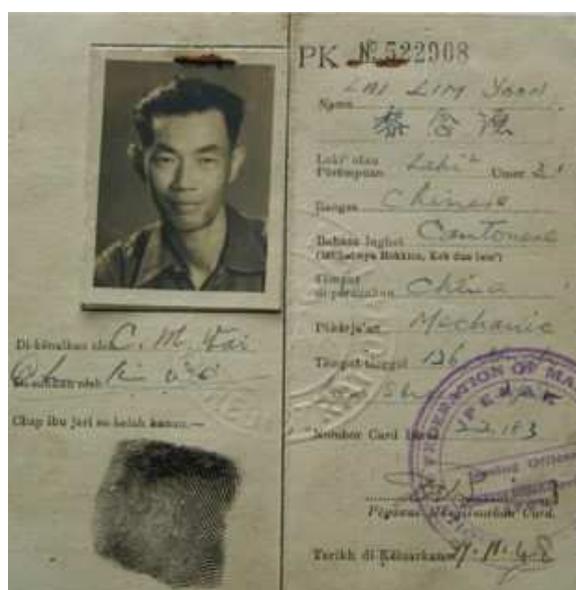


Figure 5. An identity card (courtesy of Cheang Keen Weng)

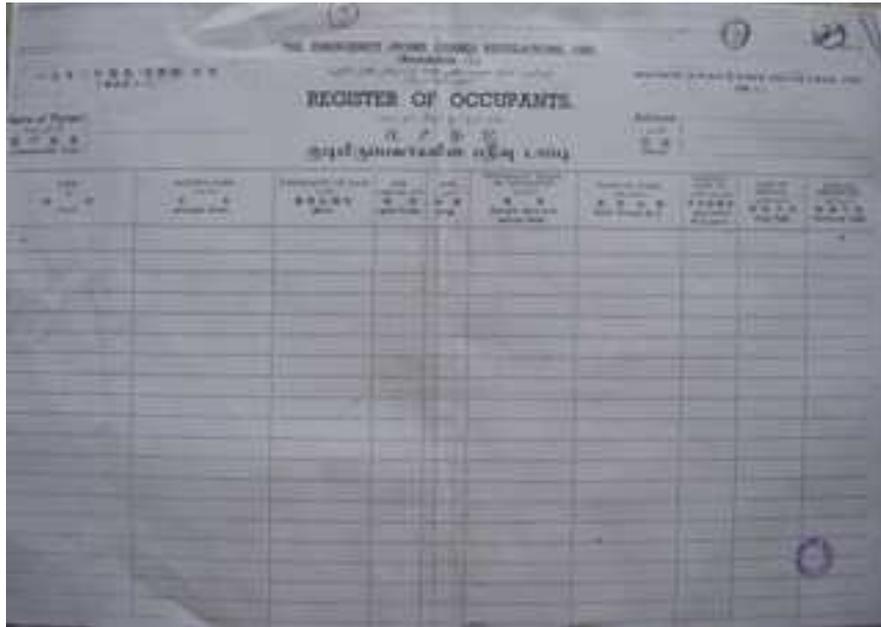
Another enforcement policy was food control. Besides rice, other controlled items included sugar, salt, cooking oil, dried fish, tapioca, flour and flour products, as well as tinned food. Many rubber tappers who had to commute to rubber estates for work every day mentioned that they were not allowed to carry their lunch with them and were forced to endure working in a chronically malnourished state for several years. In certain “bad” areas, the government introduced another form of food control called the “central cooking kitchen scheme” in order to prevent the leakage of rice to Communists. The very first central kitchen was set up in the Bahau district of Negeri Sembilan in May 1954. Under this scheme, the chief cook collected uncooked rice from the store and carried it to the central cookhouse under security escort. After cooking, the families came to the distribution centre and collected carefully portioned cooked rice to take back home. This practice was devised because cooked rice does not last and is too bulky to smuggle out. To prevent villagers from taking any food outside the village, the government also implemented daily body searches. Every morning, men and women had to queue up in two rows to be searched by guards at the main gate. These checkpoint body searches were felt to be an act of gross indignity by many local people. In one famous case, in Semeyih New Village at Kajang in Selangor, women complained that people could look into the booth where they were forced to undress for a female searcher to check their bodies.<sup>27</sup>

Screening was another regular occurrence in the New Villages. In this case, all adults were requested to gather at the *padang* (public space), and then walk, one by one, past a small van. Inside the van there would be hidden a *kuai tao*—in the Cantonese dialect literally a “ghost head”, referring to any collaborator like “surrendered enemy personnel” or Special Branch informants—and if the *kuai tao* knocked as someone passed by, the police guards would whisk the person away for further interrogation. “No evidence is needed,” recounted one informant, “It depends on your luck!”<sup>28</sup> On another occasion, an elderly lady

<sup>27</sup> See Federation of Malaya, *Report on the Conduct of Food Searches at Semenyih* (Kuala Lumpur: The Government Press, 1956).

<sup>28</sup> Author's interview with Mr. Chai, Tras New Village, 28 November 2007.

simply assumed: "The government never took anyone without a reason, the person must have done something wrong."<sup>29</sup> Many agreed that they felt insecure and could not trust anyone at that time. One interviewee stated, "You just keep silent, away from both sides, the local Min Yuen and government informants, otherwise you will get into trouble one day."<sup>30</sup> This passive fearful position echoed the sentiments of many local people.



**Figure 6. A tenant registration form (courtesy of National Archives of Malaysia)**

In addition to the strict regulations surrounding resettlement, the British established various organizations in the New Villages. For instance, Malayan Chinese Association branches were set up in almost every New Village. Missionaries were encouraged to build churches and mobile clinics organized by the British Red Cross Society and Saint John's Ambulance Brigade formed part of the Government effort to implement "after-care" policies. The Government also set up home guard units, Boy Scout and Girl Guides Associations and village committees in the New Villages. Attempts to mould "loyal citizens" included establishing civic courses, campaigns such as "Anti-Bandit Month," or Good Citizens' Committees, as well as holding local council elections.

For the first time, the full weight of the colonial state apparatus was deployed in certain specially demarcated areas, bringing rural dwellers, both physically and mentally, face-to-face with the coercive force of a modern state via its authoritative presence in the form of colonial officers, institutions, organizations and, as discussed above, a variety of control techniques. Through a mixture of "carrots" and "sticks," the British authorities gradually transformed their "unknown subjects" into the British colonial government's "New Villagers."

<sup>29</sup> Author's interview with Grandma Ng, Tras New Village, 25 November 2007.

<sup>30</sup> Author's interviews with Bertam Valley New Villagers, in March 2008.



Figure 6. A food control notice (courtesy of National Archives of Malaysia)

### Conclusion

Sixty years after the declaration of the Emergency, it is clear that, from a military standpoint, the British colonial authorities successfully separated “the sheep from the goats” and won the undeclared war. Even Chen Peng, General-Secretary of the Malayan Communist Party, admitted in his autobiography that the resettlement project succeeded in severing their food supply from the Min Yuen.<sup>31</sup> The success of the Emergency’s resettlement programme in British Malaya even made it a counter-insurgency archetype for the rest of the British Empire and the West in the Cold War era.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Chin Peng, *Alias Chin Peng*, p. 269.

<sup>32</sup> For instance, Elkin’s fine study on British Kenya provides a detailed account of how the British Colonial administration in East Africa learned from the Malayan Emergency experience and employed similar policies (mass detention, Emergency Villages and punitive policies) in Kenya against the Kikuyu people between 1952 and 1960. See Elkin, *Imperial Reckoning*. Another example is the “Strategic Hamlets” programme during the Vietnam War. For further details, see Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: Experiences from Malaya and Vietnam* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966).

However, a further reflection on the nature of the Emergency and its impact upon a large mass of civilians in Malaya is important and necessary. In particular, the systematic and large-scale British denial of human rights to the displaced Chinese squatters needs to be further considered. In the early stages of military operations, the security forces were on high alert and prone to shoot any suspicious person on sight in rural areas. The initial “shoot to kill” and “search-and-destroy” military policies during the counter-insurgency stirred up much local resentment and resulted in many tragedies. In one of my interviews, for instance, a father recounted how he had to cycle some distance to collect his son’s body after he was shot by security forces—his son, who worked at a rubber estate, had forgotten the curfew time and had exceeded it.<sup>33</sup> In other cases, the villages of Pulai in Kelantan and Kachau in Selangor were burnt to the ground as a reprisal by the security forces in August and November 1948, respectively. Another notorious case involved the massacre of twenty-four Chinese villagers in Batang Kali in Selangor, on 12 December 1948, by the Scot Guards. While official reports described the villagers who were shot as “escaping bandits,” controversy remains over the mysterious circumstances of this bloody event.<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, very little attention has been paid to the socio-psychological impacts of the Emergency upon relocated New Villagers. The Emergency measures imposed in the Chinese New Villages highlight the unique character of these people as a special category of Chinese in Malaya: a group whose identities were shaped by forced resettlement, artificial villages and highly militarized surveillance and regulation. Living under a constant shadow of fear, due to the terror tactics employed by the British as well as the Communists, these Chinese were shaped into a “silent people”—a populace that “heard nothing, saw nothing and said nothing.”<sup>35</sup>

The majority of rural squatters who became residents of New Villagers were Chinese, who were both mistrusted by the government and intimidated by the Communists. Their life experiences and memories remain a valuable historical source that complements and challenges self-congratulatory official or state discourses about this period. The oral histories of the New Villagers provide a vivid picture of their everyday lives, something that underlines the importance of recollections and social memory for historians and their subjects alike.<sup>36</sup> Through the practice of oral history, the testimonies of informants who recall the past not only help construct a hitherto unknown social history, but they can also empower those involved by prioritizing their own voices and their own interpretations of their lives. In so doing, “history becomes more democratic”<sup>37</sup> at the same time that we deepen our understanding of Malaya’s post-war experience through a process of collective remembering.

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<sup>33</sup> Author’s interview with Mr. Lim, Jenjarom New Village, Selangor, on 3 February 2008.

<sup>34</sup> For more details on the Pulai incident, see John Humphrey, “Population Resettlement in Malaya,” Ph. D. thesis, Northwestern University, 1971, pp. 67-68; Kachau and Batang Kali cases, see Anthony Short, *In Pursuit of Mountain Rats*, pp. 162-169. In the year 2008, the Batang Kali villagers submitted a petition to the United Kingdom government requesting “an inquiry to determine the true facts, an apology, compensation and a memorial to the 24 victims.” However, the UK Government has rejected the case. See “UK Rejects Massacre Inquiry Call,” 30 January 2009, on-line at: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/7860287.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/7860287.stm), accessed 1 Feb 2009.

<sup>35</sup> *The Straits Times*, 10 August 1950.

<sup>36</sup> There has been a constant debate about the value of oral history as a historical source, with some critics contesting the reliability of memory, the subjectivity of surrounding issues and the interpretation and representation of a person’s life. Despite such complexities, oral history remains an important historical source. See *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>37</sup> Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).